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Re-reading Myths at the Beginning of the Twenty-first Century

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The Myth of Creation in Reverse or the Disavowal of Genius in Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein*

Abstract: According to Freud, disavowal implies the denial of a frightening reality, a defense mechanism that is triggered in the initial phase of psychosis. The term may also imply, like in the fiction I propose to analyze, a refusal to assume responsibility for the consequences of one's deeds and, as such, it certainly leads to disastrous consequences. If Mary Shelley's novel was intended as a critique of Romantic self-indulgence and as a vision of the destructive implications of a creative mind, it is no less certain that the authoress intended to point out the inevitability of such a fate for the visionary who disconnects himself from reality in order to pursue the fantasy of omnipotence. In my paper, I intend to link several psychoanalytical concepts—such as the uncanny or the theme of the double—to the development of Gothic fiction as a subgenre of Romanticism, while attempting a psychoanalytical re-reading of Victor Frankenstein's actions and their terrible results.

Keywords: disavowal, psychoanalysis, Romanticism, Gothic, responsibility

Motto: "There is something at work in my soul, which I do not understand" (Shelley 18).

Introduction

In her "Making a Monster: an Introduction to *Frankenstein*" from *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, Anne Mellor clearly explains why the 19th century authoress unquestionably engendered one of the most powerful myths of Romantic literature: "Frankenstein is our culture's most penetrating literary analysis of the psychology of modern 'scientific' man, of the dangers inherent in scientific research, and of the horrifying but predictable consequences of an uncontrolled technological exploitation of nature and the female" (9).

Speaking of psychology and science, I have chosen as a motto for this paper a quote from the letter that ship captain Robert Walton writes to his sister, at the onset of his wondrous voyage to the North Pole. Besides pointing out the hidden workings in the spirit of man that are responsible for one's destiny, Walton's letter exposes a personality whose fated mate will be that of the scientist and dreamer Victor Frankenstein. The early craving in the captain's heart is for a friend who would be a match for his fortitude and idealism:

> I desire the company of a man who could sympathize with me, whose eyes would reply to mine… I have no one near me, gentle yet courageous, possessed of a cultivated as well as of a capacious mind, whose tastes are like my own, to approve and amend my plans… I am too ardent in execution and too impatient of difficulties… and I greatly need a friend who would have sense enough not to despise me as romantic, and affection enough for me to endeavour to regulate my mind. (Shelley 15-16)

Robert's personality is the exact counterpart of Victor's. They have the same mindset, arduous yet sensitive, and so they fall prey to the workings of fate in the same way (they get easily distracted from an ordinary successful life path by reading esoteric sources that plant into their souls the seeds of grand

romantic endeavors, not meant for ordinary humankind), they persevere and falter in their paths, prone to disavow their chosen mission at the crucial point and have the tables of fate turned against them. Since Robert Walton's misadventure is meant as a frame for Victor Frankenstein's tragedy, it is but natural that the sea captain's character be in fact a mirror for the soul of the doomed doctor: similar to Walton's case, Frankenstein would have done well to look for a friend and collaborator when he had embarked upon the lurid task of building a new life-form out of cadaver parts. Additionally, the source of his tragedy is that he transmits this unconscious craving of his heart to the soul of the monster he is building and who, upon awakening into existence, desperately tries to bond to the human folk he observes timidly from a distance, but repeatedly fails to engage with. The monster's ultimate request to his creator is therefore a commonsensical one, taken into account his circumstance: that Frankenstein should create a mate for it. And the scientist's revulsion to and resolute rejection of this idea triggers their mutual catastrophe, an event that finally sucks in Robert Walton's enterprise and purpose.

Analysis

I shall begin my demonstration of the reversed myth of creation by exposing the makings of Mary Shelley's novel. Initially released in 1818, it is, historically speaking, perfectly integrated into the period designated as Romanticism in literature, roughly unfolding between 1780 and 1830. In the 1831 preface to the third (and standard) edition of the text, Mary Shelley attributed the genesis of her novel to a daydream she had of an "artist" bringing a creature to life, a deed whose achievement would have terrible consequences for himself and those close to him. In fact, the birth of the preeminent Gothic fiction of all times (until, at least, the publication of *Dracula* by Bram Stoker in 1897) originates within a literary contest that took place on the shores of Lake Geneva in 1816, when Mary Shelley, her husband—the poet Percy B. Shelley—and a few other companions, among whom Lord Byron, decide they would each tell a ghost story to the audience. That is why the action of the novel is situated in the Geneva region, as a tribute to the moment of its creation. Among the literary and mythical sources of inspiration, there figure prominently the legend of the Greek God Prometheus—thief of fire and maker of man, in some legends—but also Milton's *Paradise Lost*, one of the most influential works preceding the Romantic era.[1]

Paradise Lost set the standard in matters of Romantic taste by promoting the sublime in landscape, with the transcendent imagery of mountains, seas or storms, and cultivating pervasive feelings of awe and terror, associated with the experience of vastness and silence. All these elements are to be found, as in a mirror, reproduced exactly (in a sort of pastiche style), in Mary Shelley's remarkable fiction. Her novel also comes curiously close to the utopia/dystopia genre, representing a perfect life circumstance that is subverted early on and turned into the worst nightmare ever, for protagonist and reader alike.[2]

The critics of *Frankenstein* have noted how this novel welds discordant notions such as superstition and science, Gothic magic and rational enquiry, being a hybrid of sorts, and finally every bit as monstrous as the horrific creature it exposes. Besides the influence of Romanticism, owing to her poet husband, Mary Shelley was equally indebted to her parents, who were both revolutionary figures of their times. In fact, the novel is dedicated to her father—William Godwin, a rational-anarchist philosopher open to the ideals of the French Revolution—and also to her mother—Mary Wollstonecraft, a prominent feminist of her time. They had both written works, which, in a way or another, influenced their daughter's literary output and were bound to make it revolutionary in spirit, to say the least.

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[1] In this work, an epic retelling of the Genesis which also inspired Percy Shelley's poem *Prometheus Unbound*, Satan's prophetic dramatic persona represents the cultural and political outsider who boldly questions the status quo of morality and religion, thus becoming the hallmark figure for the Romantic rebels of the future.

[2] From this point of view, Mary Shelley's prose is akin to Edgar Allen Poe's, in the sense that it tempts the reader into endorsing the main character's fantasy and then to sharing in his fate (giving at least one the opportunity to see what it would take to be in that character's place).

The moral of the story is quite simple, however, when told in the terms of the search for forbidden knowledge, which refers to a dangerous pursuit for perfection. The novel could be said to be dystopian, in the sense that it regards with ambivalence traditional religion, the Enlightenment ideals, as well as the theories of man-made redemption, expressing skepticism towards Christianity, as well as towards Rationalism and the Romantic notion of the genius, in science as well as in art. It seems that the unique family background of the writer conspired with the propitious time and place of the writing, to generate the thrilling prodigy of a novel which seems to share the attributes of the monstrosity it narrates about. And, just like Frankenstein's monster, the novel prospered, traveling widely across time and space and enjoying a wild popularity, as its author desired.

There is one more circumstance that should be mentioned regarding its creation: Mary's mother had died shortly after her birth (and so the author, like the novel's hero, is an orphan); also, just one year before the idea of the story occurred to her, Mary Shelley had given birth to a child that had lived but two weeks (so the idea of reanimating a body can be more or less consciously connected to her trauma of loss). Although informed by biography, the novel has so many facets and has incorporated so many influences that an autobiographical reading would be limiting, nevertheless. It remains a mystery to its readers and critics alike and open to reinterpretation just like Shakespeare's work will always be. But biography is important as a criterion for an era fascinated by the confusion in the mind and its dark recesses, before the advent of psychology. In fact, it is rather upon the groundings in Victor Frankenstein's biography and on the psychoanalytical reading of his actions that I want to focus in the following lines.

The Freudian term 'disavowal' (in psychosis) refers to a splitting of the ego confronted by some distressing demand from the outer world—in contrast with 'repression' (in neurosis), where the demand comes from within. In general terms, the word implies a denial of knowledge, relationship, and/or responsibility towards something (or someone). Again, critics of Frankenstein agree that the case of the novel's main character amounts to a hubris connected to the evasion of responsibility by an ardent humanitarian idealist—Victor Frankenstein—who animates a monster made out of body parts of human and animal origin, in the hope of creating a new race that would hail him as creator. Substituting himself to God, Victor cannot help being human and ultimately shuddering at the monstrosity of his own creation, which he abandons in fear and disgust. He is therefore smitten by the hand of Providence for his transgression, much as Prometheus had been for bringing heavenly fire to the human race. The monster Victor creates is quite innocent and benevolent in the beginning but turns evil and destructive when its repeated attempts to integrate with humanity unavoidably fail. It ultimately turns upon his creator, whose happiness he destroys by killing first his little brother and then his bride on their wedding night (since Victor repeatedly refuses to make a mate for the monster). The moody Romantic genius is thus destroyed by his own misdirected creation and one wonders indeed why Victor had to animate a monster instead of having a baby of his own or why, after creating the monster, did he not face the consequence of his deed, but totally disavowed the result of his strenuous scientific effort, refusing any connection to its obvious result.

According to Nicola Trott, the Romantic genius may oscillate between "frenzy and lassitude, intoxication and disgust" (Trott qtd. in Gilroy n.p.) with the object of his endeavors, because of the paradoxical nature of Romantic inspiration that separates cause and effect. But in psychoanalytical terms, the reason for disavowal may be located in the family background, being engendered by a faulty child-parent relationship. Indeed, as Victor Frankenstein reminisces of his childhood, he recounts that his relationship with his parents had been one of "object" of their affections, calling himself their "plaything." Moreover, reading his confession, we find out that his parents' relationship had been one of tutor and pupil (his mother being in fact "adopted" by his father, much younger than him and the child of a dear dead friend). Frankenstein's bride, Elizabeth, is also an adopted child and his mother presents it to him one day as his present: "her promised gift" which he regarded as "mine to protect, love, cherish… as a

possession of my own… my more than sister, since till death she was to be mine only" (Shelley 29). It is indeed quite obvious that, despite the idealized climate of love and benevolence, the bond of natural affection is quite weak in this adoptive family. However, what is ranking high in their internalized system of values is the repeatedly confirmed belief that they can decide the happy fate of others, who should in turn please their "owners" by serving and loving them faithfully. We are not surprised therefore that, when in this perfect world view, the monster makes his appearance (failing to confirm Victor's expectations), he should abandon it as a dissatisfying possession, or like a broken toy, failing to integrate it in his perception of reality.[3] Frankenstein, therefore, cannot acknowledge the dark matter of his spirit in the way that Shakespeare's hero Prospero does in the end of *The Tempest* with Caliban, by proclaiming: "this thing of darkness I acknowledge mine" (n.p.). While Prospero was a wise sorcerer, Mary Shelley's hero seems to be a frustrated individualist. The monster may then be interpreted as a projection of his creator's aggression and repressed sexual drive, since his family hides the reality of desire under the guise of adoption. The split within the self, between the good and the bad object,[4] is instantiated by the theme of the double in the novel, with Frankenstein and his monster mirroring each other, while continually exchanging sides as pursued/pursuer or master/slave. In fact, the posterity of the novel in popular culture does not even make a difference between them anymore, frequently calling the monster by the name of Frankenstein! Last but not least, the idealized family image triggers the appearance of monstrosity in their lives, as an instance of the Freudian "uncanny"—a dreadful thing arousing from the familiar, which is also a typical feature exploited by the Gothic genre, whose connection to the religious is quite subversive. The Gothic derives its energy from the excessive, improbable and the monstrous, seeking freedom from aesthetic restriction and defying moral convention. In theory, the Romantic notion of the Unity of Being may be achieved by overcoming the dualism between spirit and mind, though in the case of Mary Shelley's hero, this amounts to self-extinction.

While the myth of creation speaks of an original inspiration out of which the whole world developed, in Mary Shelley's Gothic thriller the spark of life ignited by the doomed scientist is the trigger of his world's unravelling, plunging him from the euphoric heights of creationist elation to the depths of despair, within the blink of an eye. As Mellor argues, Mary Shelley was certainly ironic towards the Romantic notion of her husband, regarding the idealization of the male self (the underside of which was the repression of femininity):

> Specifically, she takes issue with Percy Shelley's notion (later articulated in the fragment "On Love") that the lover imagines an idealized form of himself, then sets out to find its "antitype" in the world. That such a strategy pits women against a masculine ideal that is sublimely egotistical is only part of Mary Shelley's point. For she also suggests that the lover's idealizations represent a deep-seated fear of female sexual desire. (13)

The coming into being of the Creature is the materialization of Frankenstein's deepest-seated fears, his return of the repressed, the embodiment of "a Freudian text in reality," according to Paul Sherwin (889). The critic whose article I am referring to here correctly pinpoints the source of Frankenstein's primal repression and argues against the more simplistic (or misdirected because overcomplicated) Freudian readings of Mary Shelley's text. I believe Sherwin is right in identifying the death of Frankenstein's mother as the original impulse for the reanimation project, death being likened to "an original anxiety of deprivation associated with the departure of the mother" which is deemed "a pre-eminently narcissistic

[3] Andrew Michael Roberts discusses this circumstance as an instance of the fantasy of omnipotence, quite common in early childhood, when there is a belief that the world is created by and exists solely for our own happiness (see Nicholas Roe, *Romanticism: An Oxford Guide*).

[4] terms taken over from relational psychoanalysis

insult for Frankenstein" (Sherwin 894), as much so as the impression made on him as a child by the bolt of lightning that consumes the massive oak-tree. Overtaken by primordial anxiety, Frankenstein realizes that death, in relation to life is "not an external agency but an internal component" (Sherwin 894) so that, in desiring and giving life, one inevitably ends by embracing death's ice-cold body—an all-encompassing pessimism that equally explains Victor's premonitory dream of Elizabeth turning into his dead mother, just after the Creature's stirring to life.

For the main characters in this Gothic fiction (Frankenstein and the storyteller Walton), the quest they have embarked upon is deflected and they are ultimately left powerless to act along the path they have chosen. Their efforts tend towards exhaustion or disintegration, in keeping with the concept of Romantic inspiration that feeds upon the dying embers of a grand vision (according to Percy B. Shelley). Both Victor Frankenstein and Robert Walton had embarked upon an adventure—one in the realm of medicine, the other as a Polar explorer—seeking to break new ground and seize the mysteries of creation: the scientist aims to create a new life-form that would call him master, while the explorer hopes to discover the heavenly paradise at the northernmost extremity of the globe. Even though they do not fail to keep track of their purpose, their dreams turn into nightmare, since both propose to exceed the limits of humanity. Their quest is self-centered and therefore circular, egotistic. They have no love for humanity, since the former seeks to engender a different race, while the latter quite literally leaves humankind behind. Ironically, in both cases, fate backlashes and destroys their hopes. Freudian psychoanalysis is therefore extremely fit to investigate the groundings of these crumbling edifices.

According to Paul Sherwin's psychoanalytical re-reading of Frankenstein, the "uncannily fearful" creature is a representation of the primal repression or an embodiment of the sublime, which "disqualifies any attempt at integration" and prevents "the institution of a firm psychic apparatus" (886). The monster thus embodies "a progressively more enthralling superpower" and Frankenstein is ever more deeply subjugated by this dark double, joining "in the frenetic dance of death that impels these mutually fascinated antagonists across the waste places of earth" (Sherwin 886). To motivate the engendering of this horrific quest, Sherwin argues quite convincingly, that "there is a treacherous wishing-dreading circuit that links Elizabeth and the Creature" to Frankenstein's dead mother, who is cast as "the central term of the triad" (887). The dream that discloses this connection happens right after the disastrous act of animation and reveals Frankenstein's repressed desire for his dead mother (that Elizabeth evokes to him), which in turn engenders the fear and guilt represented by the Creature who simultaneously stands for "the accusatory phallic father… and the castrated self" (Sherwin 887):

> I thought I saw Elizabeth, in the bloom of health, walking in the streets… Delighted and surprised, I embraced her; but as I imprinted the first kiss on her lips, they became livid with the hue of death; her features appeared to change, and I thought that I held the corpse of my dead mother in my arms; a shroud enveloped her form, and I saw the grave-worms crawling in the folds of the flannel. I started from my sleep with horror… every limb became convulsed: when, by the dim and yellow light of the moon… I beheld… the miserable monster whom I had created. He held up the curtain of the bed; and his eyes, if eyes they may be called, were fixed on me. His jaws opened, and he muttered some inarticulate sounds, while a grin wrinkled his cheeks. He might have spoken, but I did not hear, one hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me, but I escaped. (Shelley 56)

Waking from the terrible dream only to find the disgusting product of his creation standing at this bedside, Frankenstein wrongly assumes that the hand extended towards him was supposed to inflict death and flees in horror from it. Later on, he convinces himself (quite without ground, as it seems to the critic) that the Creature is only capable of inflicting evil, as a symbolic punishment sent upon him from above ("I conceived the being in the light of my own vampire, my own spirit let loose from the grave, and forced to destroy all that was dear to me," 76). In fact, the creature slowly turns into what the world (especially

Frankenstein) expects it to be. While in the beginning its utmost desire was to engage in a sympathetic relationship with another being, the monster, excluded from the human community, "begins to objectify the negativity he arouses in others," so that we may recognize his aggression as "a by-product of disintegration, not an innate drive that has been cathartically unbound" (Poovey 337). Amidst manifold psychoanalytical interpretations of Frankenstein, Paul Sherwin insists that the utmost characteristic of the Creature is its "virtuality," it being a representation of the uncertainty principle, perpetually prone to misreading, a thing that Frankenstein justly calls his "daemon":

> A marginal or boundary being, the daemon is a powerful representation of our uncertain lot, suspended as we are between knowledge and power, nature and supernature, objectivity and subjectivity. Conceiving the Creature as a genius of liminality, a type of art's duplicitous interplay of revelation and concealment, restores his virtuality, which is betrayed as soon as he comes to signify something determinate. (Sherwin 891)

What the critic here referred to pleads for is a broader explanation, still offered in terms of Freudian analysis, but avoiding narrowing-down or deterministic readings. He urges us to stay alert to the heterogeneity of meanings surrounding the Creature, invoking a close reading of it or "the need to look at something again and again until it begins to declare itself" (Sherwin 891). While for the doomed creator, the Creature may be a monster, for *Frankenstein*'s readers the monster could prove to be an enlightening parable for descending into the deep recesses of human nature.

Indeed, by following the critic's train of thought, we are rewarded with the light of understanding. Going back to Shelley's vision of creation that Sherwin himself invokes ("the mind in creation is as a fading coal," 891), we can understand art and its final product as a betrayal of its original source of inspiration, which is of divine essence. The artistic product, however, is far from being divine, mediated as it is by the imperfect vision of human nature. A mere shadow on the wall in contrast to the flames that project it, human creation is ugly and frustrating, but mainly for its creator, since the public could in fact appreciate the result of artistic effort. However, for Victor Frankenstein, the artistic vision materializes not only in an imperfect creation, but it is one that reminds him of the haunting truth he cannot efface: his despair over the human condition consists in the fact that it is tainted by death, creation is a reminder of death, which in its turn is an internal component of life. This explains his dream of Elizabeth turning into the image of his dead mother, a dream he has right after animating the monster.

Sherwin posits the possibility of a "primal scene trauma" (893) for Frankenstein, one that may have triggered the solipsistic drive of his creation. The untimely death of his mother, coupled with the childhood scene in which he witnesses the destruction of the great oak-tree by a lightning bolt, constitutes an insult to his narcissism, generating an extreme anxiety of estrangement. This represents the starting point of his desire for disentangling life from death, for creating without the sin of conceiving, in other words this is the onset of his "restless drive for autonomy" (Sherwin 894): "I will pioneer a new way, explore unknown powers, and unfold to the world the deepest mysteries of creation" (Shelley 45). But being a pioneer requires facing the world alone, and Frankenstein's account of his embarking upon his quest suggests utmost loneliness as a *sine-qua-non* condition for the success of his dream: "I seemed to have lost all soul or sensation but for this one pursuit" (Shelley 52). His intent was to pursue nature to its innermost "hiding-places" which is akin to a violation of sacred limits, and seize upon the mystery of creation which is the ability of animation, which he eventually acquires. Yet, he does not stop at this. In his delighted frenzy he dreams of animating another human being and maybe even bringing back the dead. In her introductory study, Kate Mellor also observes that one can read Frankenstein's fall as Nature's revenge:

> Waldman and Frankenstein share with early modern science the assumption that nature is only matter, particles that can be rearranged at the will of the scientist. They thus defy an earlier Renaissance world-view that perceived nature as a living organism, Dame Nature or Mother Earth, with whom humans were

> to live in a cooperative, mutually beneficial communion. Frankenstein thus opposes ecology with egotism, with his own yearning to command the worship only a God receives… But Victor's scientific experiment, as the world knows by now, does not succeed. This is not merely because the creature turns on him, but also because "Mother Nature" fights back. (19)

As Sherwin points out, the consequences of the character's extreme isolation are self-loss coupled with self-aggrandizement (a mixture of narcissism and psychosis), so that Victor Frankenstein finally turns into the mad genius that can dream of substituting himself to God, but only until his creation is given life. At the moment of the Creature's animation, Shelley's theory of artistic inspiration is applied and the dream of heaven turns into a hellish vision: the Creature is sublime, therefore unrepresentable, its extreme ugliness being symbolic for its meaning—it is the embodiment of Death-in-Life. And so, we can understand how the satanic void created by the artistic need generates the myth of creation in reverse, where putting together is the same as dismembering (since the Creature is made out of fragments of corpses). At this point, it is worthwhile reminding ourselves that Mary Shelley intended her novel as a critique of the Romantic genius, representing estrangement from humanity (and from the path of God) as Hell itself, which is where her hero sinks at the very moment of fulfilling his purpose.

The monster's existence points to another moral of Frankenstein's story: his revolt against Death is so great that he separates himself from God and humanity, yet his worst punishment is not the failure of his project, but the fact that he is blinded to the ultimate necessity that a man of science should endorse—that of responsibility towards his deeds. Victor's incapacity of dealing with and facing up to the challenge of his own creation, his flight in horror from the reality he had engendered is what brings about his downfall. What the creature protests and reacts against so violently is ultimately encompassed by the novel's motto ("Did I request thee, Maker, from my clay to mould me Man, did I solicit thee from darkness to promote me?" [Milton X]): the creator's lack of response, his construing of the monster into an intolerable being ("an unspeakable artefact" [893], as Sherwin calls it), is in fact an instance of his lack of response-ability or the inability to respond in a humane, responsible way to the circumstances. Thus, the creature comes to symbolize "a token of loss, a complex representation of the estranged universe Frankenstein has summoned into being by pushing away reality" (Sherwin 893), confirming Mary Shelley's character as "yet another Gothic hero-villain, a tiresome neurotic" that egotistically glories in his own doom (Sherwin 899).

Conclusions

To conclude, I would like briefly to recall some of Poovey's arguments regarding Mary Shelley's authorial intent, in an attempt to decode the ultimate source of the monster's parable. According to the above-mentioned critic, the monster personifies "the psychological dimension of Frankenstein's fall, the personal anguish that attends the egotist's self-deception" (Poovey 337). However, what Mary Shelley asserts through her novelistic discourse is quite different from the profession that her husband, Percy B. Shelley, used to preach. For her, the Romantic model of the imagination is grounded in egotism (which is necessary for self-assertion) and this ends by stifling and ruling-out the "the self-denying energies of love" (Poovey 332)—therefore, she can be credited with "exploding" the very foundations of Romantic optimism: "Desire is for (Mary) Shelley a drive that can and must be regulated specifically, by the give-and-take of domestic relationships. If it is aroused and not controlled, it will project itself into the natural world, becoming voracious in its search for objects to conquer and consume" (Poovey 334).

The reason why the writer may have been thus inclined to feel falls not within the scope of our present discussion. Suffice it to say that Mary Shelley's position was not an extremely comfortable one in her time, since she had to define her artistic persona as separate from her husband's and yet he was her guide and councilor in artistic matters. She also had to account for her status as a woman in Victorian society, to

uphold morality and family values, while attempting to define herself independently as an artist. Is there such a surprise that her inner self was struggling not to come apart, that it had to be made up—just like Frankenstein's creature—from shreds and patches, to appear to deny its own nature while struggling to survive and break free from convenience? In writing and then editing Frankenstein's story, Mary Shelley seems to have succeeded the nearly unachievable feat of both revealing and hiding her true self: speaking her mind while disguising her fears, dismantling yet simultaneously exulting over the concept of Romantic genius—in other words, endorsing disavowal at the same time with making excuses for it, inasmuch as the novel's main agonist, Victor Frankenstein unconsciously did.

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Deconstructing the Signs of Subjugation: A Feminist Revisionist Reading of the *Ramayana* in Snehalata Reddy's Play, *Sita* (1974)

Abstract: Myths and mythology have always attracted critical attention. As the first creative faculty of the human mind, authors use them as framework for their writings. Myths are ideology-laden narratives, with a deep psychological impact. They are the living embodiments of India's cultural consciousness, tales Indians live by and breathe on a daily basis. Critics acknowledge their power as sources of information, while feminists bring out their hidden politics. Myths maintain a master-slave, superior-inferior relationship between men and women. A feminist perspective deconstructs the male dominance and foregrounds the suppressed female voices in these tales. The present paper focuses on Snehalata Reddy's revisionist writing of the fire-test episode from the *Ramayana* told from Sita's point of view in the play with the same name. The play foregrounds the agony and humiliation of Sita and unmasks, step by step, the hegemonic strategies adopted by patriarchy to keep women in subordinate position. Derrida's deconstruction theory and feminism's idea of 'ecriture feminine' are used as methodological frameworks for this analysis. Foucault's ideas on the production of truths and Baudrillard's hyperreal world will be also referred to.

Keywords: bias, ideology, myth, psychological conditioning, subordinate, victim

Motto: "The message is clear: heroes are brave if they fight their enemies; heroines are brave if they sacrifice themselves" (Harris and Platzer 300).

Motto: "Writing presents an unbounded space in which the self that strives to constitute itself through mastery of the other is relinquished and in which the other can finally be received" (Cixous qtd. in Sellers 26).

Introduction

Heart rending and appalling Nirbhaya incident,[5] earning New Delhi the title of India's rape capital,[6] took the world by storm and question-marked the claims of the uplifted position and assured women freedom in the 21st century. It indirectly hints at the vulnerability of women to such unfortunate incidents if they do not adhere to the Indian cultural tradition and its value system established through holy

[5] December 16th, 2016 in Munirka, a neighborhood in South Delhi, India, a 23-year-old female physiotherapy student was beaten, tortured and gang raped while she was travelling on the bus in the late hours with her male friend. Six people aboard, including the driver, brutally raped her after fatally assaulting her friend with an iron rode. After the rape, victims were thrown out of the running bus. They were hospitalized by a passerby. The rape victim died on December 29th, while she was taken to Singapore for an emergency treatment. Initially, the victim was called by several names but later she was called Nirbhaya, which means fearless in Hindi language.
[6] The Nirbhaya incident and the data released by the NCRB (National Crime Record Bureau) for the year 2015 show that out of the total of 6266 complaints of stalking in India, 1124 were from Delhi only.

scriptures, *vedas*, *puranas* and *shastras.*[7] The values and ideas discussed in these texts are the living embodiments of India's cultural consciousness. Even in today's tech-savvy age, the Indian woman is expected to carry forward the legacy of *Panchkanyas*[8] and live her life as a *pativrata.*[9] This "man-formed mythic-maze" (Palmer 75) views woman as a fragile entity to be taken care of and protected by man. Thus *Manusmriti*[10] lays rules for the protection of women: in her childhood, a woman is to be protected by her father, in her youth by her husband and in aged days by her son. This protection rule denies women any personal freedom and individual identity. Iconic Hindu epics[11] favor the phallogocentric world view and demand women's unquestioning submission, involving their "externalization-alienation" (Spivak 497). The "revision and inversion of canonical myths" (De Weever 24) reveal that the unwavering reverence of this cultural/mythological tradition has resulted in women being controlled physically and oppressed psycologycally by men. So, the question arises, how is this deep perception of power imbalance between man and woman produced?

Michel Foucault, a leading 20th-century historian, studying the strong nexus between power, knowledge and truth, notes that society exercises power with certain "production of truth" (93). These truths are established through various institutions and that is how the "culture of truth" is initiated. Analyzing power structures in a society, Foucault notes:

> …in any society, there are relations of power, which permeate, characterize and constitute the social body, and these relations of power cannot themselves be established, consolidated nor implemented without the production, accumulation, circulation and functioning of a discourse… We are subjected to the production of truth through power and we cannot exercise power except through the production of truth. (93)

The powerful media in the production and propagation of truth and exercising power are religion, mythology and literature. Foucault calls these "polymorphous techniques of subjugation" (94), as people entrusting their faith in these texts are led to "ideological conditioning" (Foucault qtd. in Rustam 165). The psychological impact is so great that sometimes these doctrines even make their way into the gambit of law enforcement.[12]

Centuries bear witness to women's marginalization and victimization. How did this culture of female inferiority originate? In his much-acclaimed text *Simulacra and Simulation* (1981), Jean Baudrillard talks about "hyperreality, a world of self-referential signs" (Baudrillard qtd. in Poster 6). He divides this world in two parts, 'simulacra' as the copies that depict things which either had no reality to begin with, or have lost its original, and 'simulation' as the imitation or copy of the operation of a real-world process or system over time. He writes:

> …substituting signs of the real for the real itself; that is, an operation to deter every real process by its operational double, metastable, programmatic, perfect descriptive machine which provides all the signs of

[7] Religious doctrines, genres of Indian literature about a wide range of myths, legends and other traditional lore. Originally written in Sanskrit, these were later translated in regional languages. These are referred to as the rule books of ideal living.

[8] *Panch* means five and *kanya* means girls. Sita, Draupadi, Mandodari, Ahilya and Tara. They are worshipped as chaste and ideal wives wholeheartedly devoted to their husbands.

[9] Lady devoted to her husband, worships him as God and obeys all his wishes and whims.

[10] *Manu* is regarded as the first law giver of India and his ideas collectively are called *Manusmriti*.

[11] *The Ramayana* and *The Mahabharata*

[12] The Arun-Anjali divorce case of 2012. Anjali refused to live with her husband because he mistreated her. Justice P.B. Majumdar and Anoop Mohta tried to convince Anjali and referring to the *Ramayana*, said: "a wife should be like the goddess Sita who left everything and followed her husband Lord Rama to a forest and stayed there for fourteen years." ("A wife should be like goddess Sita: Bombay HC." *The Times of India*. Web. 2 May 2012.)

> the real and short circuits all its vicissitudes… A hyperreal henceforth sheltered from the imaginary, and from any distinction between the real and the imaginary, leaving room only for the orbital recurrence of models and the simulated generation of difference. (Baudrillard qtd. in Poster 170).

In this hyperreal world, male literature can be considered as 'simulacra,' as no one knows when it has started to be taken as real, while female literature can be conceptualized as 'simulation.' Images, symbols and signs are bombarded in such a way that we first take them as real and then as truth. First, we take myths as real and then accept them as truth, hence the resulting prevalent belief of man superiority and woman inferiority.

Myths

The English word 'myth' is derived from the Greek *mythos,* meaning word or story (Leeming 3). A "perennial source of fascination" (Coelho 81) and a "wide spectrum of opinions" (Doty 1), myths are considered strong vehicles of carrying ideas and beliefs. They are tools of dissemination and transmission of tradition from generation to generation. Myths can be dated back to the beginning of human civilization. *The New Encyclopedia Britannica* defines myths thus: "Myths are specific accounts concerning gods or superhuman beings and extraordinary events or circumstances in a time that is altogether different from that of ordinary human experience" (793). These are "hereditary stories" (Abrams 70). Carl G. Jung explains that myths are the projections of the collective unconscious of the human race: "The study of myths reveals about the mind and character of people. And just as dreams reflect the unconscious desires and anxieties of an individual, so myths are symbolic projections of people's hopes, values, fears and aspirations" (Jung qtd. in Guerin et al. 183). Myths "satisfy some psychological need" (Pinsent 12) of mankind. Myth critics acknowledge the fact that myths were and are an undeniable source of cultural values and norms. Myths have great impact on the human psyche as they "justify an existing social system and account for traditional rites and customs" (Graves 21). They are the storehouse of knowledge (Freud, *A General Introduction*). It is believed that myths represent natural relationships between males and females. However, feminist critics and theorists hold that myths are, to use Foucault's words, "polymorphous techniques" (*History of Sexuality,* 11) devised by patriarchy to subjugate women. Myths perpetuate "patriarchal norms and values that function within specific social contexts, concealing the conflicting interests which make-up that particular socio-historical constellation" (Hasse 132). For Kate Millet, mythology is the root cause of the assigned inferior status to women: "Patriarchy has God on its side" (51). Referring to the Story of Fall in Christian mythology, she states: "this mythic version of the female as the cause of the human suffering, knowledge and sin is still the foundation of sexual attitudes" (Millet 52). So, the authors take the task of rewriting myths from the feminist point of view in their hands. The mythopoetic tradition reveals that myths maintain "a hidden politics" of "subject/object, master/subordinate, center/margin relations for patriarchal mechanism, socio-cultural patterning and creating a situation for women conditioning for subjugation" (Rustam 164).

Objective

The proposed endeavor concentrates on Snehalata Reddy's play *Sita* (1974) to interrogate and define how it challenges and dismantles the accepted truth and reality of the phallogocentric tradition in the *Ramayana*.[13] While the traditional text focuses on the hero Rama and his adventures, the play gives voice to Sita and makes her the focus of the action and presents her story. Hence the play destabilizes the masculine truth 'simulacrum' and tries to create and establish a new feminine truth 'simulation'. Deconstructing the myth's reflecting and reinforcing the culture of the passive ideal woman and wife, Sita

[13] There are many versions of the *Ramayana*, but Valmiki and Tulsi Das's *Ramayanas* are commonly referred to.

emerges as earth-centered, of this world and body-affirming, being unwilling to embrace the covet patriarchal strategies of hegemony (cf. Gadon xi-xv).

Methodology: Deconstruction and Re-visionist Writing

Myths imply "delusion and falsehood" (Warner xiii) and hide "an ideological abuse" (Barthes 11). Feminists' re-writings of myths are a step towards defining the reality of women and empowering not just a mythological character, but the whole women community around the globe. But how can we hear the choked female voices in hegemonic masculine texts? Derrida's deconstruction theory and the second wave feminism provide an answer and framework to hear 'her' story. Deconstruction establishes that language is a free play without a center and that the "center is not the center" (Derrida a. 278) and as such incapable of conveying the truth. Sign has an arbitrary nature. It has no fixed meaning but only a contextual meaning:

> Thus, as it goes without saying, the trace whereof I speak is not more *natural* (it is not the mark, the natural sign, or the index in the Husserlian sense) than *cultural,* not more physical than psychic, biological than spiritual. It is that starting from which a becoming-unmotivated of the sign, and with it all the ulterior oppositions between *physis* and its other, is possible. (b 48)

Literature as a form of writing, a poem or a novel is a structure of traces and hence has no final or 'only' meaning. There is a possibility of infinite meanings in a text and this very possibility opens up a text for its rewriting and re-visioning. This re-vision is "a process of recovery and reformation" to revitalize old myths by new interpretation (Sankovitch 146). Das has aptly noted that "no work of literature whatsoever has been able to express exactly what it wanted to say and the critic's business is to deconstruct and re-create them taking their words as not the outward form of their meaning but only 'trace of a quest'" (38). Derrida's notion of opening up the weave of writing to enable other meanings to come to the fore offers feminists a "looking back" (Rich 35), "a revolutionary potential to counter the phallogocentric system" (Sellers 26). The Holy Trinity[14] of the second wave of feminism introduced and emphasized *Ecriture Feminine*[15] to recover the suppressed feminine voices in the multitude of masculine voices and questioned and explained patriarchy's subjugational techniques in mythology and other literature. "Re-vision" is "the act of looking back, of seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction" (Rich 35). The re-writing of myths disrupts what is commonly accepted as truth through "the inclusion of unanticipated meanings" (Kristeva qtd. in Sellers 26). What Diana Purkiss (qtd. in Sellers 27) identifies as three modes of re-writing poetry can be safely applied to the feminist re-vision of myths:

1. The shifting of focus from male to female
2. Transposing the terms from negative to positive
3. Allowing a minor character to tell the tale

Hence feminist re-writing "tampers with internal patterns, leaving the mythical discourse in which they are embedded intact" (Sellers 27). Feminists call upon women to awake from their slumber of ignorance,

[14] Three feminists from France—Helene Cixous, Julia Kristeva and Luce Irigaray.

[15] Helene Cixous gave the term in her essay "The Laugh of the Medusa." It refers to women's writings. Women should write because they better know the pains and oppression they have and are suffering. Writing offers a space to recover their suppressed voices: "woman must write herself: must write about women and bring women to writing, from which they have been driven away as violently as from their bodies—for the same reasons, by the same law, with the same fatal goal. Woman must put herself into the text—as into the world and into the history—by her movement" (875). (Helene Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" translated by K. Cohen and P. Cohen. *Signs*.1. 4 (1976) :875-893.)

come to "their senses" and "struggle against conventional man" (Cixous 875-76). Feminist re-writing of myths subverts "the dominant ideology's hidden male bias" (Ostriker b. 214) and makes "corrections" to the constructed "images of what women have collectively and historically suffered" (Ostriker a. 73). Hence re-reading is a three-fold task: re-visioning, re-imagining and re-interpreting. Jack Zipes, critic and collector of fairy tales, distinguished between 'dublication' and 'revision' in his study *Fairy Tale as Myth; Myth as Fairy Tale* (1994). Dublication means reproduction of the original, while revision means its reexamination. Zipes bewares that "re-vision for the sake of revision is not necessarily a change for better or stimulating" (9). But in the hands of feminist writers, it proves to be a handy tool. Several women writers have revised the old myths including Anne Sexton, Anne Rich, Barbara Walker, Marina Warner, Angela Carter, Margaret Atwood in the west, while in India, notable writers include Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni, Githa Hariharan, Kavita Kane and Devdutt Pattanaik. Their writings are not "pleasurable reversals or ingenious tinkerings but new embroideries, adding fresh images and colors to radically alter the picture" (Sellers 29).

Analysis

One woman in the Indian cultural tradition, Sita, is revered for her unquestioning submission and sacrifices. When we hear her name, certain adjectives reluctantly crop up in our minds and become attributes of all women. However, the contemporary woman is determined to upset the apple cart of patriarchy and the play *Sita* is a step in this direction. Snehalata Reddy was a theatre artist, producer and social activist. She was arrested during the Emergency time[16] and was brutally assaulted while in prison, eventually leading to her death. As a feminist, she hold the ideal of gender equality and her only play is a proof of her sharp wit and intellect that questions why the word of the man is law to be adhered to and why woman stands for nothing but only to be used and abused. Her Sita defies the female stereotype of an ideal Indian wife and takes the steering wheel of her life in her hands. This play is an important text in the *Ecriture Feminine* tradition, as it presents a world of domesticity, subjugation and alienation and it is against this oppressive world women are revolting. Foregrounding the bitter truth that female voices seldom find place in the pages of history, Reddy takes the initiative of writing about women with the hope that others will follow her example and bring justice not only to mythical and fictional characters, but create a path for real women to follow, to make them aware of the masked oppression that is dug deep in their psychology and paralyzes them from taking action. It encourages them towards self-fulfillment, to make their own destiny, to strive for glory in their own right and to be equal partners in the advancement of the world and for the benefit of the humanity.

Exposing the invisible dualities and hidden oppressions embedded in the Hindu mythological tradition, *Sita* (1974), a play in two acts, is a revised version of the much controversial fire-ordeal episode in the *Ramayana.* Told from Sita's perspective, the play highlights the sufferings of the marginalized man-made puppet, i.e. the woman, and transforms her into a representative figure "fighting for her self-respect" (Reddy 8). "Defying dominant patriarchal codes" (Nagar 62), she rejects Rama and finds more solace in the actions of Ravana.

The play opens with two soldiers interpreting Sita's actions. One finds her an honorable and chaste lady, while for the other she is a lustful woman, a prototype of all women. Then the scene shifts to the abducted Sita and the audience listens to her thoughts. Sitting in the Ashoka groove and eagerly waiting for Rama to take her back, she is like a withered lily. Woebegone and tired, yet Sita admits her "admiration and regard" (Reddy 3) for Ravana. Instead of Rama, Hanuman's arrival to take her back perplexes her. She deliberates that her earlier return with Hanuman could have kept the war at bay and the consequent massacre and bloodshed. Hanuman rectifies her and tells her about the codes, values and honor of the

[16] A 21-month period (1975-1977) when Prime Minister Indira Ghandi declared a state of emergency (officially issued by President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed), ruled by decree, suspended elections and civil liberties, imprisoned most of her political opponents and censored the press.

Kshatriya race. A husband must save his wife. Rama should come, fight, kill the evil abductor and win Sita as "the prize of victory" (Reddy 3). Anne Cranny-Francis in *Feminist Fiction* aptly points out that "female characters, encoded with the ideological positioning of women are accordingly passive, objectified, positioned as prize or reward for consumption by an active, aggressive male subject" (87). Commodification of women is an utterly disgusting fact, but patriarchy has been able to manipulate women and maintain this through its shrewd falsification of the idea of ideal womanhood.

The third scene is about the long-awaited reunion of Rama and Sita. The minute Sita watches Rama approaching, exalted and excited she runs and embraces Rama but finds him cold. Sita questions Rama's attitude and asks him if he is not happy to see her after such a long separation. But all that Rama has to say to Sita is that she is defiled, as she has spent time under another man's roof. He cannot accept her unconditionally, "he has done his duty as a warrior—Kshatriya King—and he fulfilled his dharma (duty) as a husband, but now as the ruler of Ayodhya he has to fulfill the dharma of casting out a wife… perceived as an unchaste woman" (Bose 4). So, she has to take the fire test to prove her purity. Petrified by the unexpected banishment by Rama, Sita is dejected. She rebukes Rama for abusing her love and for being blind to what she has "endured and suffered" (Reddy 3).

This outward turn of events leads to Sita's inward pondering over the issues of love and marriage. In an imaginary dialogue with Ravana, she praises Ravana as a medium for her self-realization, for he senses her inner self in a better way than Rama. He is sensitive to her emotions. Unable to reciprocate his love, she confesses that his love gave her a glimpse of what a true relationship between man and woman could mean (Reddy 4). Involuntarily, her mind draws a comparison between Rama and Ravana. Rama's obsession is power while Ravana realizes that love is a highly treasuring and charmful feeling in human life. Deconstructing the traditional ideal wife perspective,[17] Sita finds Ravana's actions more justifiable than those of Rama. On the one hand, Rama seeks her forgiveness for placing her in such a precarious position and on the other hand, he succumbs to his "crazy logical rational" (Kondo 53) of the fire test. Sita questions Rama's duplicity:

> It's your pride that hurts you to take me back. Even
> If it's true that Ravana violated me, if you truly love
> Me, don't I deserve your love and comfort more
> Than ever? If you loved me, wouldn't your love be great
> Enough to wipe away my humiliation and pain? (4-5)

To Sita, Ravana's world is free and sanctified while Ramarajya[18] is a hollow façade of the ideal husband-wife relationship. Only to satisfy his kingly ego and establish himself as a king of people, Rama is ready to sacrifice his wife. His response to Sita's bewailing is one of the typical patriarch's responses:

> As my devoted and wedded
> Wife, your happiness is not something different
> What pleases me should please you! (5)

Rama tells Sita that he has no doubt about her purity, but it is the wish of his people that she should prove her chastity. Here we have a glimpse of the "Hindu imagery of manliness" (Kakar 55). Rama may have all the traits of a "godlike hero, yet he is also fragile, mistrustful and jealous and very much conformist both to his parents' wishes and to social opinion" (Kakar 66). He dares not contradict the will of the unwashed

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[17] The life and death of a wife is bound with her husband. She should remain devoted to him even if he is cruel, inconsiderate of her feelings, disable or evil. She should respect him and submit to him. Even cherishing the thought of other man was considered betrayal.

[18] The ideal state of Rama's kingship and Rama and Sita as ideal husband-wife.

masses, but deliberately destroys Sita's dreams of a joyous reunion. In a soliloquy, Sita pours her soul in her thoughts. She was kidnapped, she did not go and live under Ravana's roof of her own choice, so was it her fault? Rama has "used, cheated and betrayed" her (Reddy 5). He is a "cruel" tyrant, a "murderer" of her hopes and dreams (Reddy 5). As her last resort, she tries to convince Rama of her love for him:

> Come away Rama! Give up this kingship
> Give up these narcissistic dreams of greatness.
> This vanity. Let's go back to the forest.
> I'll teach you to love again. I'll show you
> The wonders of love. (6)

This soliloquy is a gateway to the innermost thoughts of every woman, their perception of the life and world, and their dreams of future. Marriage for them is not only a relation of physical bodies but of souls, of mutual understanding, of "reach[ing] the far horizon" (Hurston 14). For them, worldly glory is vain. The only true emblem of glory is love.

Set in the grand assembly of Rama, the second act does not "pass on a tradition but break its hold over us" (Rich 35). All the preparations for the fire test are complete. Sages summon Sita in the assembly. She is decked like a newly wedded bride. Revered Sage Vashista states the cause, procedure and time of the fire test to the public. Sita asserts her individuality and brings down "a closed conversation to an active dialogue" (Fetterley qtd. in Eagleton 123). She says that there is no such law of purification by fire in the *Shastras*. Sages warn her not to question the validity of the doctrines. Sita boldly retorts:

> Why not? Is it
> Because I am a woman that it is forbidden to Question?
> Must women be treated as second Class citizens?
> Am I not allowed to speak in my own defense? (7)

Sita's portrayal here is unlike the popular image of a docile and submissive wife who never protests or disagrees with her husband, duty or society. Jasbir Jain notes:

> Gender is constructed by an interplay of both femininity and masculinity. Further, the manner in which retellings have altered them is equally relevant, for the change marks either the resistance or a shift in the social perception of the role, or it may also signify a shift of focus because of the social location of the narrator/narrators. (29)

Here Sita resists the dominant culture of patriarchy. Sage Vashista tries to appease Sita with another prevalent thought, that husbands are gods and it is the foremost duty of wives to obey their husbands' every whish and whim. Sita answers back that if husbands are gods, then it is obvious that wives are the goddesses. Vashista tries to lure her with the idea that the test will bring her fame and her name will be written in golden letters in history books. She will be remembered as the "greatest pativrata" (Reddy 7). Unyielding and defiant not to be fed by "the same deadly diet" (Daly 44), Sita pulls off the mask of patriarchy's hypocrisy, that nobody will remember her "humiliation and suffering" (Reddy 7). She will be thrown in the dustbin of history, "scribes and Valmikis will rewrite history as… they like it! The rest will be expunged" (Reddy 7). Adams aptly notes: "history was made by, about, and for men—an androcentric compilation of the historical record of mankind perpetuating the idea that women were little more than the passive 'helpmeets' to use the biblical phrase, of these extraordinary male actors" (243).

Worried about the nullity of the Ramarajya concept, Rama steps in to convince Sita. Sita logically defends her actions. To her, Ramarajya is a flawed concept. It will only perpetuate fraud, mistrust and women victimization. She tells Rama: "I'm afraid of this awesome male domination and the helpless,

pathetic and unbelievable martyrdom of women" (Reddy 7). Sita bewails the accepted "gender-roles, of the stereotypes of wife, mother and courtesan" (Dalmia 317). From her birth till death, a woman lives under the male authority. Her function is to produce male heirs. No matter what she does, her every achievement is equivalent to zero. She is hold culprit for any catastrophe. Her life is tied to her husband. If he dies, she has to be a sati (self-immolation) or to be an outcast always dressed in white. Sita "genuinely portrays the nuances, traumas and ambiguities that rack a woman's sensitivity" (Kalpana 97). Centuries have witnessed women's marginalization, but now it is time to assert their identity "to unsettle this hierarchical binary" (Singh 105). Sita sows "the first seed of [women] revolution" against the "guilt, shame and tireless self-imprisonment" (Reddy 8). Amidst the commotion and agitation in the gathering, Sita "beseeched" the audience to:

> Remember my pain,
> My rejection, my humiliation—for they will
> Bury it all in silence. Remember me not as a goddess
> Of virtue but as a defenseless woman (8).

Sita's words unmask the power politics working at the heart of patriarchy. Anger surges up in Rama and he threatens Sita with rejection. Fierceful Sita defies the "dominant patriarchal code" (Nagar 62):

> It's I who reject you!
> I reject you as husband, as lover—and I
> Reject you above all as the father of my unborn
> Children—and I go to my doom—gladly!
> With glory in my heart! But not for you—
> But for Ravana! (8)

Sita makes a plunge and takes the most daring decision of leaving her husband. She sets an example for other women. The message is clear. A woman has her own individuality, her own identity. She is not an inferior being. She possesses every capability to stand on her own feet and can achieve whatever goal she has set her eyes to. Stories and myths are constructed to cripple her, to keep her in a dependent position. But once a woman recognizes this coveted patriarchal phenomenon, she is ready to stand up against it. Unleashing her real potential, she can soar "higher still and higher" (Shelley line 6) and nothing can stop or cut short her flight of living her dreams.

This "digging underneath" (Morawska 43) of the fire-ordeal episode indicates how Rama's insistence on Sita's taking the purification test and his concern for worldly glory, his preference for kingship over Sita and her love is a discreet example of patriarchy's framework to keep women underprivileged and in a marginalized position. Sita's rejection of the unhappy marriage in favor of the true love and compassion embodied in Ravana is the dawn of a new woman possessing integrity, intelligence and intensity, who is independent and audacious enough to create her own path to undertake the journey of self-fulfillment.

Conclusion

Admired as "the ideal of womanhood" (Kakar 55) and debunked as "lousy role model" (Murphy and Sippy 18), Sita's myth is worth investigating because it has and continues to construct powerful narratives of female identity and conduct. Its revision enabled Reddy to assert the silenced voice of Sita, to recover her thoughts from the mist of history, to make her a model of woman consciousness and end the age-old martyrdom of women in the name of religious doctrines and customs. Sita's speech raises a valid question: who is the real villain? Is it Rama, wearing the attire of holiness and praised as just king but most unjust to his wife, mistrusting her and insulting her emotions or is it Ravana, thought as demon and unjust

abductor, but recognizing and respecting Sita's integrity and emotions? The present Indian social scenario offers similar questions to be probed and before they are answered, a deep introspection on the part of men is required. In the name of reverence and adherence to ancient texts, are not they dissecting the very moral code these texts narrate? Time after time debates focus on women to be mute and follow the trodden path and avoid risks of being different to avoid any catastrophe. But why not these debates debunk the hideous intentions and obnoxious acts of men raping, beating and oppressing women and why our justice system has become so lame that it takes refuge in these texts and instruct women to be submissive and forgiving and letting the criminals escape the hangman's noose? We abhor Ravana for being evil and for kidnapping Sita, but are the actions of modern Ramas moral and just? Does Rama in the *Ramayana* not rape women and does Krishna in the *Mahabharata* not pour acid on women's face? It is time for women to take arms against patriarchy, which is prejudiced against them and sabotages their happiness in the name of manmade rules, and guard their interests as Reddy's Sita does. The feminist writing rescues what is suppressed and releases energies which can be directed towards female empowerment. With her audacious resisting spirit, Sita breaks the stamped shell of passivity and deconstructs the mythical tradition of male chauvinism that founds its basis in these ideological and cultural texts blindly followed as the source of moral and cultural ethics. Rather than following the traditional destiny of marriage, dependency and silent sufferings, women need to empower themselves with the weapons of education and knowledge. With these comes the awareness of the injustice and pain and also a financial independence essential to fight the age-old subjugation and to dethrone the patriarchal kings and take the charge of their lives in their own hands to build a future based not on gender bias, control or oppression but on equality, mutual understanding and equal opportunities: a harmonious progressive world.

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The Story of a Feminist Woman-Goddess: Re-reading, Re-telling and Ritualizing Draupadi in India Today

Abstract: The paper analyzes Divakaruni's rewriting of the mythical story of Draupadi (from Sanskrit *Mahbharata*) in her *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), as well as her projection in the Indian popular rituals. It investigates Draupadi's iconic status as a fierce feminist standing her ground even against the violence she experiences at the hands of men, among them, her five husbands. My thesis is that the narrative of Draupadi will continue to remain a cult myth, thereby leading to more future artistic manifestations, primarily because her assimilation in the Indian cultural psyche is somewhat incomplete, as she remains an untamed woman with strong political and sociological views, refusing to bow down to the questionable standards of the Indian society, voicing her dissent, rage and protest at her exploitation at the hands of a patriarchal system. Her emancipation in the ancient narrative, and furthermore in the retellings and rituals today, acts both in favor of her as well as goes against her: she is a mythical woman who is denied justice and who is constantly demanding equanimity, thus becoming an icon for the supporters of equal rights for women in the present century, who can draw their inspiration from this ancient myth.

Keywords: Indian myth, Draupadi, the *Mahabharata*, Divakaruni, feminist woman-goddess.

Introduction

The continuing process of rereading, revaluating and retelling mythology marks a rigorous critical engagement with the people's past and their cultural memory. It is not particularly a 21st- century phenomenon that retellings of the epic *Mahabharata*,[19] or those from the vantage point of Draupadi have been attempted: there exist precedents in medieval Sanskrit literature, as well as in literatures written in both vernacular languages and English, in India, in recent times. The paper takes a three-fold path in examining this myth.

First, it explicates why should we revisit and reread Draupadi's story in the original narrative of the *Mahabharata*, preferably beyond a victim-perpetrator lens. Second, it attempts a critical reading of a contemporary retelling of Draupadi's story by Chitra Baneree Divakaruni in her *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), which makes significant departures from the original epic in giving the reins of narration of an all-male enterprise (i.e. the Great War) in the hands of a female, somewhat flawed heroine. And third, the paper undertakes a brief study of the resurrection of the myth of Draupadi in various rituals and cults and popular culture in India, thereby examining the manifestation of a gendered cultural memory in contemporary India. Having examined all these areas in fair detail, the paper will head towards examining as its conclusion why this phenomenon of the rebirth and resurrection of the myth of Draupadi is here to stay, in light of the state of the feminist movement in India at the turn of the century.

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[19] While scholars largely disagree about the time frame when the epic was possibly composed, most of them believe that it was composed, orally, over a large period, ranging from 400 B.C.E to 400 C.E. However, eminent scholars of the *Mahabharata*, namely J.A.B. van Buitenen, James Fitzgerald, and Nicholas Sutton believe that the major narrative passages were composed between 400-200 B.C.E., and the later centuries had bards and redactors adding on to the main body of the narrative.

An (Un)Familiar Myth: Revisiting/Rereading Draupadi in the Epic

The single most apocalyptic moment in the Indian folk/literary scene is the disrobing of a menstruating Draupadi in the Assembly Hall (as a result of her husband, Yudhisthira, the eldest Pandava, wagering and losing her in a game of dice with Duryodhana, his first cousin and the eldest Kaurava). This episode from the *Mahabharata* is often read as the reason for the tragic fratricidal war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. Scholars have largely read the violation of a female body as leading to an all-engulfing violent war which knows no bounds. Needless to say, traditional scholarship has held Draupadi, like Helen of Troy, responsible for causing the war and the resultant massacre!

The character of Draupadi in the Indian epic, the *Mahabharata*, and the scene of her disrobing have disturbed readers of all generations for myriad reasons, the primary one being the fact that Draupadi represents the figure of the unprotected, vulnerable woman in a largely patriarchal society. Interestingly, Draupadi symbolizes a paradoxical blending of the feminine: she is both the victim of patriarchal mores in the epic, as well as the fiery woman who refuses to be victimized and give in to the adversity she finds herself in. She is, as Jung would say, a 'shadow,' an 'archetype' in the 'collective unconscious' of the society: it is not unusual to come across cultures where women's bodies are 'shadows' supposedly owned by men, and hence the cases of violence against women also abound everywhere in the world, more so in India (Sarieddine, "Women" n.p.). However, some women also rise up and lash out against the violence perpetrated on them, which, of course, is desirable and becomes exemplary.

According to Alf Hiltebeitel, one of the epic's primary foci is "the question of who Draupadi is as a figure—a rebel, a figure who is independent, vigorous, challenging, a principled woman, a very difficult kind of woman, [and/or] intellectually shrewd" (xxvi). It is probably this overwhelming mystification in ascertaining who Draupadi is and what she stands for which has led artists, writers, and people to continue to re-narrate her story in the form of theater, performances, novels, poetry, and paintings; or to appropriate her into their daily lives and rituals.

Many scholars in the past have viewed Draupadi through a victim-perpetrator lens, thus pushing her real character to the background, losing sight of the fact that even in the epic, Draupadi is projected as an extremely knowledgeable lady, well-versed in the ancient Indian scriptures and knowledge texts, as well as various treatises on morality, ethics, law and the various arts. She was "an exponent of dialectics... best [witnessed] in her sabha confrontation"[20] (Kumar 257). She is born out of a sacrificial fire to King Drupada of Pancala, and not of a woman's womb, her birth being accompanied by the prophecy that she will bring about the ruin of the *ksatriyas* (the warrior class). She is depicted as beautiful, virtuous, independent, fiery and learned in the scriptures.[21]

In a marriage contest, Draupadi is won by the middle Pandava, Arjuna, but on the command of Kunti, her mother-in-law, she marries all the five Pandava brothers.[22] The epic gives several explanations for the polyandry of Draupadi, sometimes also projecting her as an incarnation of Sri, the goddess of wealth and prosperity. However, the epic leaves the exploration of a significant aspect of Draupadi's heart and mind almost untouched: it leaves a lot of questions unanswered in depicting her quiet acceptance of a marriage

[20] Sabha literally means the Assembly Hall, which, in ancient times, used to be a male assembly for administering matters of politics, strategy, and law.

[21] Learning the scriptures was considered to be a male prerogative in the times when the epic was composed.

[22] Having won Draupadi in the marriage contest, Arjuna and the Pandava brothers take her to their humble abode in a forest where they have been living in hiding from the world. When the brothers excitedly announce to their mother their arrival and ask her to turn around and look at what they have brought along, Kunti, without turning around, commands them to share whatever they have brought home. The command of the mother was never to go unfulfilled in the ancient Indian society, and hence Draupadi chooses to marry all the five brothers. An arrangement to avoid any discord amongst the brothers is later made, where it is decided that Draupadi will spend one year each with one husband, starting from the eldest, Yudhisthira, and at the end of every year, she will regain her virginity.

to five husbands, and it makes readers wonder about the everyday challenges and emotional pangs that she, as a common wife, had to deal with, not to mention the curiosity about which of the five husbands she loved more than the others.[23]

Various scholars of the *Mahabharata* also hold the heroine to be the undeserving victim of grave injustice in the epic. In the dicing scene, after Yudhisthira loses her in the game, Duryodhana orders that she be brought to the assembly of the Kauravas as a slave to the new masters. Draupadi refuses to come with the messenger till the time she receives an answer to her question: "Whom did you lose first, yourself or me?"[24] She asks him to pose the question to Yudhisthira and come back to her with an answer. Interestingly, the question posed by the messenger in the Assembly Hall has been reframed by him as "As the owner of whom did you lose us?", thus sharpening the focus of her question (Das 38). A menstruating Draupadi, clothed in a single blood-stained garment, hair disheveled, is dragged into the Assembly Hall despite her protests; she is "seized, held down, shaken, ridiculed, called 'a slave' (*dāsī*), and almost fully stripped" (Hudson 98). The Kauravas continue to humiliate her: Karna questions her chastity and honor (owing to her five marriages), Dushasana attempts to disrobe her, and Duryodhana makes an indecent sexual gesture towards her. One is left to ponder upon the fact that if Draupadi, a queen and wife of five husbands, can be treated in this way, how much more will the magnitude of the horror that awaits ordinary and unattached women be!

Scholars note the conflict involved in reading the episode of the dicing in the epic, with Draupadi at the receiving end of violence at the hands of men. She is not someone who would allow her oppressors (both the Kauravas and the Pandavas) violate her self-dignity, her body, or her position (she was freshly anointed as the Queen of Indraprastaha). She constantly reminds her violators in the Assembly Hall about the act of transgression they have committed. However, the assembly of wise men is largely quiet about the double-transgression of her feminine self as well as her body, thereby failing to answer the pointed questions she poses to the elders in the Hall about her right to dignity as a woman and a wife, about the idea of ownership and propriety, slavery and freedom, and the duties of a king. McGrath maintains that though Draupadi in the epic is characterized by "wrathfulness" and "adroit and subtle use of forceful language," she is "a figure of paramount suffering" (153). She is "the doll or puppet who speaks, who even recognizes herself as such; as devi, she is the lady who plays who is also played" (Hiltebeitel 198). Sally Sutherland believes that "the character of Draupadī has a special appeal, for coupled with victimization, is a strong realization of her victimization. And she responds to it by mounting aggressive and outspoken attacks on her husbands" (Sutherland qtd. in Shah 110). Instead of resigning to her fate, she rebels against her oppressors (including her husbands, who are supposed to be her protectors) and questions Yudhisthira's right over her, especially after having lost himself in the game. She makes this into a legal question of the rights of a husband over a wife, and the freedom of a wife/woman and poses it to the assembly of men, kings and lawmakers. Mukhoty rightfully points out: "Throughout the... epic [especially after her humiliation], she follows the dictates of her own sense of justice" (15).

By standing her ground and asking the question, Draupadi is really revealing the dark side of the masculine code of both heroism and chivalry, which unconsciously though, presumes its ownership of women and their bodies (Shah 47). Shah also suggests that Draupadi's questioning of her humiliating treatment ends up exposing them rather than her, as was the Kaurava intent (47). Lena Taneja strongly

[23] These significant questions and emotions of Draupadi have been dealt with quite satisfactorily, by future writers who have been engaged in a perennial quest to deconstruct her character. A significant case study that the paper undertakes is that of Divakaruni's retelling.

[24] Hiltebeitel puts forth a very interesting proposition in his article titled "Draupadī's Question," where he sets out to enquire about the possible links between "goddesses and flesh-and-blood historical women" by tracing "what a heroine questions," since this, according to him, would help in arriving at the answer to the question of whether or not "the goddess is a feminist" (196).

holds that “Draupadi never seems to doubt for a moment that is truly free. It is perhaps her sense of freedom that keeps her sticking to the question that will also free her husbands” (Taneja qtd. in Hiltebeitel 200).

The foregoing discussion elucidates the necessity of revisiting and rereading the story of Draupadi. Since the debate on whether she should be looked at with sympathy/empathy, or as an exceptionally strong woman who stood her ground in the face of violence and hardships still continues, one is inclined to think that all is not yet over with the character and the story associated with her! This unsettled contestation about what this mythical character really stands for today, is possibly the fuel that keeps propelling her many rebirths and resurrections in literature, art and popular culture from the ancient and medieval times, down to this day! Draupadi’s life and her continuing legacy has also set great examples for the posterity, quite feminist and humanist in their impetus for an egalitarian society. This may be another reason why women in India, especially, continue to hark back to the trials and tribulations of Draupadi, both in their bid to expose the treatment meted out to women in a male-dominated society, and as a source of inspiration to steer clear of the tyranny of such a society!

A Heroine Extraordinaire: Retelling Draupadi’s Story

In *The Palace of Illusions* (2008), Chitra Banerjee Divakaruni takes up the daunting task of delving deep into Draupadi’s inner recesses and giving voice to a mythical woman’s most intimate feelings, her constant struggles and the test she is subjected to in a patriarchal society, the numerous instances of thwarting of her innermost emotions that her multiple marriages might have entailed for her, and her secretive love for the one man she can never have as her husband or make her feelings known to him. Divakaruni’s novel is quite modern in its approach to contemporary issues of home and belonging, love and defeated emotions, war and the realization of its futility, and, most importantly, in its depiction of a fiercely independent woman who refuses to give in to the pressure of patriarchy, and fights tooth and nail till her last breath.

Reading through Divakaruni’s novel, one can easily discern a woman writer seeking to wrestle with the psychology of another fictional woman: Draupadi’s extraordinary birth from a sacrificial fire, her upbringing under the constant realization of being an unwanted child,[25] her agony resulting from her marriage to five husbands, the cold tussle with her mother-in-law who is the trigger behind her polyandrous marriages, the challenges involved in loving all her husbands equally and serving them all like a loyal and caring wife, and her willing suppression of her secret admiration for Karna, to name a few. As opposed to the semi-divine, largely unperturbed and composed Draupadi in the epic, Divakaruni tries to illuminate a larger tension in her narrative: the human conflict between the individual self of Draupadi, and the gendered, social norms that she is expected to perfect, like any other fellow female, all the while bearing in her heart the burden of not being loved singularly or not being able to reciprocate her love, of being unwillingly thrown into a situation where she is forced to have multiple alliances, and hence bearing the ignominy of being labelled as a fallen woman. Her character illustrates Simone de Beauvoir’s postulation about what it means to ‘become’ a woman in a patriarchal society. Divakaruni makes an attempt to redefine female subjectivity by re-negotiating the distribution of power in a socio-cultural setup, where the female protagonist is invested with the agency to feel as well as the freedom to fall, unlike in the epic where Draupadi is expected to live up to her role as the ideal *dharmapatni* (lawfully

[25] Draupadi’s father, King Drupada, conducted a massive sacrifice which went on for a month in his desire to have a son, who would spell the doom of his enemy Drona (who was once his dear friend). At the end of the sacrifice, he is blessed with a son, Dhristadyumna, and also a daughter, Draupadi. The birth of the latter was not desired by Drupada in the first place. Divakaruni exploits this motif in the epic and lets her young heroine believe that she was an unwanted child in the household, a factor which contributes significantly to the development of Draupadi’s relationship with her brother, her governess Dhai Ma, her sister, Shikhandi, and her vision of her future in the novel.

wedded wife, and partner in duties) of Dharmaraja Yudhisthira, and mostly maintain a stoic image of womanhood who privileges responsibility over passion.[26]

The Palace of Illusions unfolds in four parts: the first dealing with Draupadi's birth and childhood, and her impatience to grow up and fulfil her destiny of changing the course of history, and the young Draupadi disliking the lonely walls of her father's palace, harboring dreams of having a beautiful palace of her own when she grows up. Krishna[27] is projected as her constant friend, companion and guide, who also quenches her thirst for knowledge. Though Krishna, her father and her brother want her to marry Arjuna, she has set her heart on Karna before the *swayamvar*,[28] but Krishna and the love for her brother ensure that she marries the former. She leaves with Arjuna to enter a small hut instead of a palace, which marks her "initiation into womanhood," as Kunti on the other hand commands her sons to share Draupadi between themselves (Multani 223). This is followed by an intense power struggle between Kunti and Draupadi, as the latter believes Kunti willfully forced her into multiple alliances because she wanted to perpetrate on her what she herself went through: Kunti was married to King Pandu, but had to perform levirate with four other gods to beget children. Meanwhile, Draupadi's dream "Palace of Illusions" is built by Maya in the barren land of Khandav. The third part of the novel begins with Draupadi's journey to Hastinapur with her husbands, where the (in)famous scene of dicing plays itself out. Banerjee depicts Draupadi's "complex feelings... [of] helplessness, agony, anger, shame and anguish... [where s]he overcame her vulnerability as Krishna's voice resonates in her mind, 'No one can shame you if you don't allow it'" (Multani 223-24). Divakaruni thus harps on the strength of Draupadi's character rather than Krishna or some overarching idea of cosmic justice having saved her from humiliation, as the story in the original epic and its various recensions go, rendering her as a strong woman full of intrinsic self-worth, regardless of what is done to her mortal body. Divakaruni probably harps on the idea that the body of a woman will cease to be associated with a false sense of honor if the woman herself refuses to acknowledge the same, thus turning the patriarchal logic on its head.

Draupadi in the novel also rises up as a "goddess of revenge and retribution," and Divakaruni shows her aging, growing "old, wrinkled with matted hair," and it is only after this period of calming down that she can avenge herself upon the Kauravas, also realizing the futility of war by that time, the horrific dawning upon her of the fact that "[f]or the wives of the common soldiers she was a witch who would transform them into widows" (Multani 224). The illusion of her palace comes shattering down completely at this juncture. In the last stage of her life, Draupadi renounces the world along with her husbands to the Himalayas, and when death grips her, she experiences only the comforting warmth of her soul mate, Krishna, and the true palace awaiting her above, whose "walls are space, the floor is sky, its center everywhere" (Divakaruni 360). Draupadi thus achieves an expansiveness and immortality which is somewhat lacking in the epic's heroine. The last two sections on war and the ascent to heaven are also highly philosophical in their foregrounding of the emptiness of war (a largely male construct and domain), and the limitations of mortal life (and body). It is, however, noteworthy, that Draupadi becomes the mouthpiece for such philosophical discourses in the novel.

Another point I would like to mention briefly is the fact that the exclusion of women from war can point to the position the *Mahabharata* takes towards its definition of femininity. Shah points out that "in spite of the entire epic revolving around a great war, there is no reference to any woman handling

[26] Born of the union of the god of righteousness, Dharma, Yudhishthira is regarded as the ideal man who will safeguard duty and righteousness under all circumstances.

[27] Krishna is a highly revered character in the epic. He later came to be worshipped as a deity, leading to a rise of the ancient cult of Vaishnavism. He is worshipped in various forms even today, with temples and places of worship dedicated to him all over the country.

[28] A *swayamvara* was a marriage contest where a princess would choose her prospective husband from among the assembled men who were suppoesed to win that contest.

weapons. Draupadi... is a mere fiery exhorter to her husbands; nowhere does she emerge as an active war-figure" (181). Divakaruni, however, gifts her Draupadi with the divine vision which is otherwise only available to Sanjaya (for narrating the war to Dhritarasthra), which symbolically extols Draupadi not as a mere spectator, but as an active and critical witness of the Great War, also making her privy to all secret conversations, like those between Karna and Kunti, and between Bhisma and Karna. Not only can she 'see,' but also 'hear,' and hence 'know' more than the epical heroine, thus adding to her might as a well-informed character in the novel. Particularly interesting is Draupadi establishing her own court of women after the war, to hear out the appeals of the widowed, downtrodden, or exploited women. This is another interesting departure from the epic that Divakaruni depicts, striking a blow to the male hegemonic order, the court of law being another traditionally 'male' arena, by letting her heroine have and preside over her own parallel court for dispensing justice, for women and by the womenfolk in the novel.

Divakaruni's retelling of the epic with Draupadi as the narrator thus establishes the heroine, Draupadi, as an enlightened, empowered woman who takes the reins of her life in her control despite the limitations that an orthodox society levies on her, and demonstrates how, through the power of feeling, knowledge and argumentative skills, she attempts to break free of the shackles imposed on her by patriarchy and society, and breathes more freely, in fact, humanly. The retelling leads to a self-formation in the character of Draupadi, and, by extension, in the readers of Draupadi's narrative (especially the female readership), demonstrating how she steers clear of multiple conflicts within herself, and how this has led to the possibility of the creation of new sociological and cultural identities through the medium of the aesthetically reincarnated Draupadi for contemporary women, especially in India.

From Myth to Heroine to Goddess: Draupadi in Rituals and Popular Culture

Draupadi reincarnates not merely in novels and literature, but also in some communities in India in the form of rituals and cults. Myth, as one would know, is essential to any ritual, and the latter becomes one of the contexts of the transmission of myths, which in turn serves the purpose of social reproduction, among many other functions (cf. Crook 8). Draupadi has been adapted as an idea at the level of the everyday through daily/seasonal/yearly rituals, leading to the survival and perpetuation of her image in contemporary India. Her story from the *Mahabharata*, especially the episodes recounted above, have found myriad interpretations and transformations, thus leading to numerous literary, dramatic, theatrical, performative, folkloristic and ritual retellings and transmissions.

Numerous theatrical and folkloristic traditions have developed around Draupadi, wherein she is transformed from a mythological heroine to a folk goddess or local deity. Additionally, this has also given birth to the creation of a cult, manifesting itself in the form of temples dedicated to Draupadi, celebration of Draupadi festivals, and ritual enactment of her life through local rituals and practices. Interestingly, these festivals are very assimilative in sociological terms, as they witness the participation of a lot of people from the lower castes and transsexuals.

The cult of Draupadi is found in different parts of India and South Asia, but mainly in Tamil Nadu, where she is regarded as a form of Devi (goddess) or Sakti (goddess of power and strength). Renowned *Mahabharata* scholar Alf Hiltebeitel has done extensive research on the folkloristic and ritual dimensions of her cult. He has also traced the oldest Draupadi temple to the north of Gingee town built by TubakiKrishnappa, founder of the Nayak line of Gingee kings (1490-1520 CE) (Hiltebeitel 34).

In addition to these cult and dramatic practices, Draupadi has been deeply rooted in other popular cultural expressions of India. The divine feminine associated with Draupadi has retained its synergy with the human feminine, to use Priya Kapoor's argument in a different, somewhat related context (247). Kapoor has rightly pointed out that within India and South Asia, "the divine and human are easily interchanged in media, in daily conversation, during worship, in the general iconography of the landscape and non-elite artwork such as calendars, hoardings... and so on" (247-48). While Draupadi becomes an

inspiration for a lot of women who become victims of sexual violence to speak up and report their suffering and pain, her life becomes exemplary for the practitioners of polyandry in Kinnaur (Himachal Pradesh) and several parts of Southern India. Additionally, Draupadi's story is also connected to the ritual of fertility and productivity, like Raja Parba, a festival celebrating the onset of menstruation in teenaged girls in Orissa, and several other Himalayan and tribal cultures in India.[29] In addition to the cult of Draupadi, one also comes across the cult of Aravan/Kuttantavar, the son of Draupadi's companion wife, the snake-princess Ulupi, who is celebrated in a Tamil cult for offering his body in sacrifice to the goddess Kali and thus enabling the Pandavas to win the war (Hiltebeitel xviii).

The ritualistic and cult practices associated with Draupadi have been a part of centuries-old traditions, and the continued renditions of her story in popular culture are also not new to India and the Indian diaspora, but they acquire greater significance in India in the present century, especially in the wake of new laws for ensuring women's equality and safety both in the home and the outside world, as well as a parallel increase in crimes against women, especially the Nirbhaya case of 2012.[30]

Conclusions

The aforementioned and many other aspects of Draupadi's narrative have been exalted to metonymic proportions in the Indian cultural life. Draupadi continues to enjoy the status of an icon for young Indian girls and their reclamation of their bodies, their feminine selves, and a gradual shift towards the acceptance and celebration of all its vagaries. On the other hand, Draupadi "is not considered a role model for young women to aspire to... daughters [are] never named in her honor. She remains, essentially, an untamed woman" (Mukhoty 22). This indicates that the work of people rallying for women rights is still incomplete, as one of their most 'feminist' icons awaits complete assimilation in the Indian society. This also serves as a reminder of the fact that Draupadi's question in the *sabha* remains unanswered. This probably accounts for her popularity with artists and writers, who do not tire of putting her character to scrutiny through myriad lenses, often, in the process, bringing her a step closer to appearing more human, realistic, and relatable, rather than a 'wanton woman' or a 'distant feminist.' After all, it is our collective responsibility as a society and as a large world community to ensure the continuance and survival, in fact, thriving and flourishing of popular retellings, surviving cults and flourishing rituals around the figure of the iconic feminist Draupadi. An ancient mythical woman is not long dead: she has only multiplied faces, and is awaiting answers and justice!

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[29] Kartikeya Patel, in Sharma (2002), p. 65, comments on "the menstruation festival (*raja parva*) of the Goddess in... Orissa. The participants often point to the story of Draupadī who was disturbed during her menstruation: what followed was a great battle and almost total annihilation of the... Kurus. [Similarly], the disturbance of mother earth's menstruation period would cause the destruction of crops and other vegetation" (Patel qtd. in McGrath 151).

[30] The brutal gang rape of Jyoti Singh, a young girl, on the night of December 16th, 2012 in Delhi, which eventually led to her death, aroused public ire for months and was also reported widely in the Western media. The case led to the proposal and enforcement of setting up of fast-track courts for settlement of complaints related to violence against women, and arguably bettered the state of gender sensitization in the country.

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Rewriting Epics: Homer's Penelope and Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*

Abstract: Myths, which fall under the rubric of religion, enable people to form a worldview and to conceptualize reality. As major narratives, once meant to shape people's belief system, they are now subjected to postmodern critical rewritings, revolutionary challenges aimed against former accepted ideas and norms. These usher in a certain change in the narrative pattern, which in turn emphasizes the change in the belief system. This paper explores this type of rewritings and the debates they have engendered. Therefore, the first half of the paper will discuss the act of rewriting as such, through a survey of literary theories and critique. The second half will approach Homer's *Odyssey* and Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad* from a comparative perspective. The aim is to focus on Penelope's point of view and show how the postmodernist novel questions the societal norms designed for women, their position in society and their role in the household, as well as the challenges faced today by a writer retelling myths.

Keywords: rewriting, myths, epics, belief system, Penelope, world views

Defining Epics, Myths and the Act of Rewriting-retelling

The paper aims to establish that the epics themselves are retellings by stating that myths were oral in origin, then turned into epics through the written medium. During the transformation, the oral text was subjected to a process of selection, addition, interpolation and projection of certain values. Controversial in terms of origin, period and authorship, their transmission and compilation should be regarded as a proof of the oral character of retelling a story.

According to *The Oxford Dictionary of Literary Terms*, myth is: "A kind of story or rudimentary narrative sequence, normally traditional and anonymous, through which a given culture ratifies its social customs or accounts for the origins of human and natural phenomena, usually in supernatural or boldly imaginative terms" (Baldick 217). Myths are stories which originated and circulated by means of oral literature before the formulation of languages. As written languages developed, myths were written down and preserved as artifacts of a particular culture. As stories or narratives, they play a central role in the life of the people and the societal context where individuals are embedded. Storytelling is an act of creating reality and belief systems for a society or a particular group. Therefore, myths are complex, fundamental narratives and repositories of knowledge, highlighting the moral values, preferences, rituals, the geography and the daily existence of a specific cultural group.

According to the same dictionary, an epic is: "A long narrative poem celebrating the great deeds of one or more legendary heroes, in a grand ceremonious style... Virgil and Milton wrote what are called 'secondary' or literary epics in imitation of the earlier 'primary' or traditional epics of Homer, whose *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are derived from an oral tradition of recitation" (Baldick 111). Scholars like Milman Parry, Max Muller and Lauri Honko have made various assumptions regarding the epics origin, nature and transmission based on the present form available to us. Epics were believed to be composed by single poets until Milman Parry along with his student Albert Lord formulated the idea that they were rooted in oral tradition.

The Parry-Lord thesis was established based on the songs of South Slavic bards, but it is mostly applied to the study of Homer. In their analysis of *Iliad*, Milman Parry and Albert Lord observed the repetitive use

of stock epithets, repetitions et cetera, which led them to conclude that the bards or poets who recited them must have depended on the use of formulaic expressions. Milman Parry analyzed the 'stock-epithets' and argued that they changed only to fulfill the metrical needs. The Homeric characters are described through the frequent use of epithets like "swift-footed Achilles" or "noble Odysseus."

In his Introduction to *The Epic: Oral and Written*, Lauri Honko, a professor of folklore studies and comparative religion, has stated that some amount of compilation and editing cannot be denied during the transmission of epics from oral to written. He argues that the epics in their present forms may be called "transitional," oral in origin but fixed in their final form, after having been transformed into the written text.

According to Max Muller, in his Introduction to Romesh C. Dutt's *The Great Epics of Ancient India*, if epic is a type of narration which glorifies the accomplishment of heroes and gods, there should have been innumerable epics. However, if we define epics as word-of-mouth narrative poems celebrating incidents of ‘heroic tradition,’ then we are able to comprehend why the number of epics is limited, no more than one or two for every nation. Therefore, he concludes, epics are small in number owing to their oral nature. He also discusses the concept of *diaskeue*, which means setting in order or revising a text. It is his view that all epic poems must have undergone such transformations after a long existence among the bards. He considers *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* as good examples that must have been subjected to recension, though there is no definite source as to how these epics were collected. Epics were present even before the art of writing came into being, they were elaborated during the Mnemonic period of literature and attained the present form after the invention of writing.

As we have seen, all these three critics argue for the oral origins of the epics.

Another author, A.K. Ramanujan, concludes his essay "Three Hundred *Ramayanas*: Five Examples and Three Thoughts on Translation" by stating that "no text is original, yet no telling is a mere retelling" (Ramanujan qtd. in Richman 46). From this perspective, all authors can bring out a different ‘crystallization’ of the story by way of a new text. Authoritative versions are given prime importance and other ‘tellings’ are evaluated on the basis of their divergence or acceptance of the so-called authoritative version. The importance of the so-called authoritative versions cannot be denied in the epic studies, at the same time the consequences of overemphasizing them should not be overlooked. All ‘tellings’ are important because each stems from a unique social, political and ideological basis. A.K. Ramanujan therefore argues for the need to consider the so-called authoritative texts as one of the many ‘tellings.’ The different ‘tellings’ validate the transmission of tales over time and space along with innumerable bards without any apprehension regarding the adaptations, each rendition being worthy in its own right.

Speaking of revisions, rewriting is a form of protest aimed at the contemporary organization of a society. Only when an awakened group decides to challenge the existing norms does the necessity of rewriting appear, as an artistic and creative way of articulating problems, such as the issue of patriarchy, and paving the way for a solution. David Cowart prefers to replace ‘rewriting’ with ‘literary symbiosis,’ a common procedure as a result of the postmodernist tendency towards self-consciousness and self-reflexivity. Symbiosis is a technique which allows the contemporary writers to enter into an "epistemic dialogue" with the past, thereby ensuring literary continuity. When an author engages in an epistemic dialogue with the past by appropriating a character or a situation, there is an alteration in meaning towards ironic, deconstructive reading, selective reading or misreading.

As Jack Zipes remarks: "the only way we can do justice to traditional tales and storytelling, in my opinion, is to problematize the value of these values and to question the purpose of tradition and the role of the storyteller" (226). By problematizing the outdated values and the role of a storyteller, rewritings make the social function of stories more evident and relevant than the original story, thus exemplifying the way perceptions towards a text change with time.

In *Politically Correct Bedtime Stories*, James Finn Garner reflects on rewritings:

> When they were first written, the stories... certainly served their purpose—to entrench the patriarchy, to estrange people from their own natural impulses, to demonize 'evil' and to 'reward' an objective 'good.' Today we have the opportunity—and the obligation—to rethink these 'classic' stories so that they reflect more enlightened times. (ix)

Rewriting a myth, such as the role of women in society, means countering a story with another story, through an interpretative act which spots not so much a writer's inconsistencies as a system's. Retellings usually add a different point of view to the narration, writers being able and allowed to choose to tell the story from the point of view of a character who has not been given voice in the original version. They enrich the whole web of myths and challenge them by exposing an overlooked issue or point of view. One such example is *The Penelopiad*, where Penelope gets an opportunity to record her side of the story.

Women Rewriting, Homer's *Odyssey* and Margaret Atwood's Penelope

Liedeke Plate defines women rewriting as a category in which classic narratives of the past are retold from the point of view of female characters in relation to gendered identity. Atwood's text is a parody of Homer's *Odyssey*, aimed to counter ideals perpetuated by this epic. The author's foremost goal is to alter the perception of Penelope as a role model, as Penelope herself says in the novella: "And what did I amount to, once the official version gained ground? An edifying legend. A stick used to beat other women with. ...*Don't follow my example*, I want to scream in your ears—yes yours!" (2) (author's emphasis).

The purpose of this paper is to trace the transformations of the mythical character Penelope by comparing the two texts in order to see the reminiscences of the original character and to interrogate the role and position of women in society as depicted in the chosen epics.

In the Introduction to *The Penelopiad,* Margaret Atwood herself asserts that she has chosen Penelope and the twelve hanged maids to narrate the story. The two stories are juxtaposed hinting that the position of women remains the same irrespective of class. Penelope's narrative begins with the sentence: "Now that I'm dead I know everything" (1). When the story opens, Penelope is in Hell and she is unhappy that the official version of the story gained prominence. She proclaims that now it is her turn to do the story-making. The narrative moves between retrospections of her life on earth and the incidents happening in a safe liminal space, Hades. Though the characters being spoken of are from myths, the issues which the novel portrays are relevant today. More specifically, the novella problematizes unvoiced women characters in the epic, like the twelve hanged maids.

Margaret Atwood has employed metafictional parody as a tool, to effect the textual transformation of Penelope and to overcome the limitations of the traditional characterization, making Penelope more human, rational and ironic. Parody, as defined by Linda Hutcheon,

> in its ironic 'trans-contextualization' and inversion, is repetition with difference. A critical distance is implied between the backgrounded text being parodied and the new incorporating work, a distance usually signaled by irony. But this irony can be playful as well as belittling; it can be critically constructive as well as destructive. (Hutcheon qtd. in Staels 101)

Homer's Penelope has served the role model of a loyal, patient and uncomplaining wife, the very notion against which the narrator of *The Penelopiad* writes her parody. Atwood's Penelope is consciously weaving her own version of the story simultaneously unweaving the traditional narrative. She speaks from Hades and lacks a physical description. She accuses Helen of being proud and voices out her complaints against the then oppressive system. Throughout the novella, she desires the beauty and admiration endowed upon Helen. Interestingly, she is intelligent, but not without self-pity and jealousy. She tricks the suitors and she equates herself with her husband Odysseus, who is known for his intelligence and trickery.

In *The Penelopiad*, semantic transformation is attempted by recreating the story of the epic. There is hardly any change in the storyline, but Penelope's self-conscious reflective comments on the story throw light on the emotions she experiences, very much in contrast with the depiction of the original character. The novella continuously deconstructs Homer's version and reconstructs a contemporary variant of Penelope, whose line of thought and responses remain the same, but whose emotions and intensions are claimed to be different. She is a typical product of the postmodern age, who is rational, realistic, ironic, bold, a reflective omniscient narrator who is unreliable and ambivalent. In Edith Hall's view she is even "arrogant, vain, insecure, unsympathetic and sexually possessive" (Hall qtd. in Van Zyl Smit 401).

Atwood draws her idea of Penelope from Book 24 of *The Odyssey*:

> Shrewd Odysseus! ...You are a fortunate man to have won a wife of such pre-eminent virtue! How faithful was your flawless Penelope, Icarius' daughter! How loyally she kept the memory of the husband of her youth! The glory of her virtue will not fade with the years, but the deathless gods themselves will make a beautiful song for mortal ears in honour of the constant Penelope (Homer, 191-194 qtd. in Atwood n.p.).

In Homer's epic, the institution of marriage and the household are intact. Penelope is praised for holding the family structure together by being constant to her husband during his very long absence. But in Margaret Atwood's rewriting, the idea of marriage and household are problematized, indicating that Penelope herself was not devoid of desire for praises from the suitors, when she was waiting for the return of Odysseus. Homer's Oddyseus, in turn, is called fortunate because he has got a virtuous wife. But the feelings and the problems faced by Penelope as a woman who manages the estates, as a wife and as a mother in the process of waiting for Odysseus are ignored. *The Odyssey*'s world is a men's world.

Atwood's Penelope boldly states her problems and reasons out her acts. By giving voice to her character, the author challenges the myth and the belief system this has engendered, namely patriarchy. Penelope narrates her story as a member of a modern society, not as an enduring woman of Homer's time. She voices out her complaints against Odysseus, her belief in him having undergone a serious change, explicit in her own words: "The two of us were—by our own admission—proficient and shameless liars of long standing. It's a wonder either one of us believed a word the other said" (138). Thus the old social norms designed for women are put into question. The rewriting of a myth, a postmodern way of exploring the unexplored, shows what Jack Zipes explains in his *Don't Bet on the Prince: Contemporary Feminist Fairy Tales in North America and England*, that retellings are "indications of social, psychological and political change, they are also agents of a new socialization" (xii).

Homer's Penelope is submissive, loyal, stereotypical, patient, distressed most of the time, weeping and longing for her husband's return. Atwood's Penelope is accused by the twelve hanged maids of having been an instrument in their murder. Though she had been able to protect herself with the famous 'Penelope's web,' and with the maids' help, she had failed to use her power and intellect to save them, too. In the novel, she acknowledges her appreciations for the praises from the suitors and her "day-dreaming" (35) of them. Instead of a model wife, a realistic delineation of Penelope is undertaken by Margaret Atwood. The postmodern heroine knows that there is no use trying to get rid of the suitors, for Telemachus is young and she has no other help but herself to rely on.

Homer's narration states that Penelope is unaware of Odysseus's arrival and it is Eurycleia who recognizes Ulysses by his scar. In Atwood's narration, Penelope identifies Odysseus but tests him deliberately to imply that she has been "tediously faithful" (138) to him even after 20 years: "I decided to make him wait; I myself had waited long enough. Also I would need time in order to fully disguise my true feelings about the unfortunate hanging of my twelve young maids" (125). Homer's Penelope was betrayed by the maids who let out the 'Penelope's web' secret to the suitors. But in Atwood's version, it is Penelope

who arranges the maids on vigil against the suitors but is eventually unable to save the maids, who will be hanged by Telemachus.

Conclusions

Margaret Atwood believes writers must bring treasured stories back for scrutinization: "it's useless treasure unless it can be brought back into the land of the living and allowed to enter time once more which means to enter the realm of the audience, the realm of the readers, the realm of change" (Atwood qtd. in Staels 111). Therefore, she deconstructs the construct of the role model using parody as a tool for transmutation.

Rewritings, as this paper has argued, enable us to understand the importance of writing, the art of modernity and post-modernity as well as the thought system of our own society. As Christian Moraru states in his *Rewriting: Postmodern Narrative and Cultural Critique in the Age of Cloning*, postmodern renarrativization can be seen as a form of cultural critique. Rewriting implies that the traditional methods of epic poetry are outdated and the ideological undercurrents which held the foundational narratives together are disintegrating. New narratives which mirror the present ideological state are thus created. In the process of launching role models, traditional narratives did not allow the characters to behave naturally. So there arises a necessity for the canonical resurrection of the mythical characters, through rewriting.

Traditional Penelope is uni-dimensional, she is defined in terms of the roles she plays in society: mother, loyal wife and daughter-in-law. Atwood's Penelope is jealous, values her suitors' attention and is highly critical as she does her ironic retrospection. The rewritten character of Penelope is more human than the role model, with extended psychological dimensions, traversing the historical and social boundaries and implying the evolved status of women in the present society. Rewritings are not to be understood as denying the authority of the traditional narratives, but as something from which the contemporary notions depart, in the words of Linda Hutcheon.

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Shattered: Time, History, and Possibility in Don Delillo's *Falling Man*

Abstract: This article develops a general conceptual model of the relationship between the structure of human historical consciousness, the multidimensional experience of time, and human agency and possibility. It includes a discussion of the ways that events that change the structure of historical consciousness affect temporal experience, ontological security, and narratives of self-identity. The experience of trauma disrupts the ontological security that is required for the continuity of identity. Trauma reorganizes our sense of time and possibility. Events that impact us negatively are more likely to remain in individual and collective memories. Traumatic events change our understanding of the past and transform our hopes for the future. They often become the pivotal points for reconfiguring narratives of personal and collective identity. The conceptual model that is developed is applied to an analysis of different strategies that selected characters in Don Delillo's 2007 novel, *Falling Man*, adopt in order to rebuild their narratives of self-identity after the shattering of history and the disruption of temporal experience in the wake of the events of September 11th, 2001.

Keywords: phenomenology, temporality, historical consciousness, *Falling Man*, Don DeLillo

Introduction

On September 11th, 2001, a traumatic event erupted from out of the blue, global in scope, with a magnitude that reverberates through time and history. Our ability to attach ourselves to time, history, and existence, and 'go on' from day-to-day revealed itself in all of its complexity. Our actions create the foundation of our possibilities, allowing us to continue to become the kind of person we already are, as we seek continuity and meaning throughout a lifetime. Our actions and possibilities must account for the ways we are positioned in the structure of historical consciousness, which is itself a structure of possibilities. In each epoch, certain courses of action are available to human beings, and they are organized as plots that are not controlled by any individual.[31] Our narratives of self-identity are created from an interpretation of who we are and who we want to be in light of our position in a historical plot.

In the construction of these narratives, our personal experience of time is a fundamental aspect of our interpretations of who we are and where we are going. Our actions and possibilities have a multidimensional temporality which is more complicated than it appears in the sequential understanding of past, present, and future. Our experience of time and our position in historical plots are intertwined in our experience and our actions. We exist in a complex and taken-for-granted "structure of happening, and the existential temporal conditions of its possibility" (Heidegger 426).

In our attempts to account for who we want to be in light of what we can become, we also need to maintain a very basic sense of stability, or ontological security. The way we inhabit time and the way we

[31] The term "plot" will refer to "the intelligible whole that governs a succession of events in a story, or the story of a life." To be meaningful, history must be organized into a plot: "To be historical, an event must be more than a singular occurrence, a unique happening. It receives its definition from its contribution to the development of a plot" (Ricoeur 171-172).

interpret the historical possibilities available to us are affected by this deep need for certainty and security as we attempt to 'go on' from day to day. In an ideal situation:

> The individual... may experience his own being as real, alive, whole... so clearly that his identity and autonomy are never in question; as a continuum in time; as having an inner consistency, substantiality, genuineness, and worth; as spatially coextensive with the body... as having begun in or around birth and liable to extinction with death. He thus has a firm core of ontological security. (Laing 41)

The desire to maintain ontological security governs our temporal awareness and our understanding of ourselves as actors in history. The experience of time, history, and ontological security in contemporary western, secularized societies differs from the same forms of experience in the world of those committed to become martyrs in the Islamic Jihad. The secular west offers endless possibilities for comfort and distraction in an eternal present, but this pales in comparison to the intensity of those whose commitment to dying produces a meaningful life in the presence of eternity. The plot of *Falling Man,* and the plot of the selected characters' lives, reveals these different ways of being in time and history.

Time, History and Don Delillo's Characters

My contention is that the human experience of time is basic to an understanding of what history is. Our temporal experience generates a view of history as moving up or down, forward or backward, as well as a sense of velocity, as speeding up or slowing down. These basic perceptions generate a constellation of terms related to agency, motivation, and possibility that crystallize as a collective Zeitgeist, or spirit of the age. Once it emerges, this 'spirit' is seized upon by those who control the means of ideological production, refined, and disseminated. It becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy that structures and justifies human action, reproducing itself until it shatters.

The construction of history also lays claim to the future. The future consists of psychological projections of possibilities that are available within the horizon of the spirit of the age. These projections produce attitudes and dispositions that manifest as strategies of perceiving the present, and acting in it. The strategies reproduce themselves by enabling *and* constraining personal narratives of self-identity. We continually emerge from our past and become who we are as we act and reflect upon future possibilities in the present.

In developing this hypothesis, I will begin by outlining the modernist historical consciousness. I want to explain how the promises it contained—scientific and technological progress, moral improvement and happiness, and economic prosperity and security—were the seeds of its own destruction. In the modernist historical consciousness, we are all called upon to make history. Every moment is pivotal. Life is a history lesson in the service of progress and the past is assembled as series of problems and solutions which we can study and use to map our future, which lies within a field of possibilities that we can predict. This route from the past to the future was the red carpet of progress that the Enlightenment thinkers rolled out in front of themselves as they escaped from tradition and superstition into the future of human self-realization. It assumed a teleological form in the work of G.W.F. Hegel, and a libertarian form in Classical Economics. Marx's dialectical approach to both forms produced an economic determinism that destroyed the past as it mapped out the future. Despite Marx's atheism, his view also resonated with Christian eschatology, the New Jerusalem would arrive because the meek would inherit the earth after the moneychangers were thrown out of the temple. Lenin pushed this further, using the military concept of an avant-garde to justify violence in securing the future. Along the way, ideological and military battles solidified this vision of history as a path into the future. Were we liberating the 'third world' or placing ourselves on the Road to Serfdom? Who could tell, since the success of this vision of history was based on continually shifting the utopian horizons into the future. The overarching goal was moral progress, and the highest impulse was toward "the design of the future as the task of a moral imperative, conceiving history

as a temporalized house of correction for morality" (Koselleck 198). Capitalism would provide happiness and freedom for all when it was properly institutionalized and supported. International Communism would triumph in the end, but only when extended globally. Fascism or National Socialism might also be a perverse 'third way' if it could become the framework for all heroic and decisive action in the future.

The leaders of each of the three ways created plots around these visions. The populations of the world were mobilized. Institutions were expanded and anchored in these plots. Hundreds of millions of people planned their lives around these plots because they had few alternatives. Over time, and while occupied with survival, they forgot that these were only plots, agreeing not to see the constructed nature of institutions, practices, and ideas. They plotted their own lives, and constructed their own identities, achieving varying degrees of ontological security; until their bubbles began to burst. It was not simply victory or defeat in war that caused this.

There is a problem with the assumption that the development of science and technology will supply evidence of history as a progressive movement. It is undeniable that scientific knowledge *does* accumulate as a body of verifiable facts which form the basis for the discovery of an ever-growing body of useful facts. It is equally true that technological development continually supersedes itself, as anyone who ever used a telephone with a cord, or an answering machine with a micro-cassette can verify. Science and technology advance as we learn their lessons and correct their errors. But scientific practice cannot find a resting point in eternal truth, because the method and practice of science involves identifying errors, putting provisional truths in their place, and living with these provisional truths, while simultaneously attempting to falsify them creating a landscape of skeptical awareness. This skepticism is compounded by risk. The technologies that science has developed allow us to observe what our senses cannot: the tiniest particles, the temperature of the oceans, the depth of the polar ice caps, the durability of the ozone layer, movements of squadrons of soldiers in the desert, and to predict danger based on these observations. Developments in epidemiology, surveillance, genetics, and cybersecurity only intensify the awareness of danger. Science has become an incubator of risk (cf. Beck 8).

Unlike science, myths or religious beliefs about the future are far more believable than scientific predictions, because they are accepted as part of a worldview that provides a historical structure and direction to the events we experience. This allows us to place information and risk in a context of interpretation, possibility, decision, and security. However, once we find ourselves outside of that mythic framework, yet still trying to prove and predict the future, all science is equivocal. One might say that we simply need to make an existential commitment to living in the face of risk, or to assembling our own identity and security by sifting through the evidence and deciding what to believe and what to reject, like taking a leap of faith without any faith. But this is not so easy, given the massive circulation of contradictory information. Sifting and weighing evidence would be a full-time job, with no time left to actually live. Science provides no certainty, but instead, looms as an ambiguous and unsatisfying account of how the future will shape, or perhaps devour, us.

The second problem within the modernist historical consciousness lies in its promise of moral development and self-fulfillment. Not all forms of life and historical development work like science. Once institutionalized, scientific knowledge can be recorded and saved. Technology also rarely loses ground because we enjoy the comforts it provides. But moral advances are subject to loss or sudden reversal. The holocausts and genocides of the 20th century are tragic reminders that science, technology, and ethical awareness are no match for our passion for revenge or our desire for power. The nations where science, philosophy, and technology were most advanced are also the nations where the moral reversal produced the most brutal results.

The modernist historical consciousness began to unravel after the First World War. Perhaps for many in Europe the bubble finally burst in 1968 or 1989. In the United States, it happened in the 1970s, a period of social disorder and recession based on an 'oil crisis' perceived to be the sinister creation of 'cartels' in

the ‘Middle East.’ The deposition of the Shah, the Iranian Revolution, and the ‘hostage crisis’ generated a vision of the Middle East as the demonic engine of crisis. The growing awareness of dependence upon ‘foreign oil’ was intensified by the partial meltdown of the reactor core at the Three Mile Island Nuclear Generating Station near Harrisburg, Pennsylvania in 1979. Amidst concerns that the hydrogen bubble which was discovered in the pressure dome of the reactor might explode and unleash a large-scale nuclear chain reaction, Americans began to realize that the nuclear alternative was as dangerous and unpredictable as dependence on foreign oil. Five years later, in December of 1984, the world’s worst industrial disaster unfolded at the Union Carbide chemical plant in Bhopal, India. The methyl isocyanate gas that was released killed over fifteen thousand people. We did not have a clear idea of what would happen next, but the mood that permeated society was analogous to the toxins in the air, difficult to identify and ambiguously omnipresent. DeLillo noted this in the last pages of his 1985 novel, *White Noise*:

> we don't know whether we are watching in wonder or dread, we don't know what we are watching or what it means, we don't know whether it is permanent, a level of experience to which we will gradually adjust, into which our uncertainty will eventually be absorbed, or just some atmospheric weirdness, soon to pass. (38)

The events of 9/11 compounded the uncertainty but clarified one thing, the question of whether we are watching in wonder or dread. In his 2001 essay “In the Ruins of the Future: Reflections on Terror and Loss in the Shadow of September,” DeLillo wrote: “There is fear of other kinds of terrorism, the prospect that biological and chemical weapons will contaminate the air we breathe and the water we drink. There wasn't much concern about this after earlier terrorist acts. This time we are trying to name the future, not in our normally hopeful way, but guided by dread” (39).

An alternative to ‘no future’ has yet to emerge and our capacity for distraction grows exponentially: “The internet is a counternarrative, shaped in part by rumor, fantasy and mystical reverberation” (DeLillo, “Ruins” 39).

The temporal immediacy of cyberspace displaces the chronology of history. Events gain their meaning topologically, through their interconnection with other events. A different sense of time and possibility emerges as an effect of the technological medium we are entangled in. We live in an eternal present and our agency dissipates in clouds of distraction and deferral. We wander in space, searching for a place that we cannot find in time.

In *Being and Time*, Martin Heidegger analyzed the relationship between three types of time: originary temporality, world time, and ordinary time.[32] The most fundamental temporal experience is originary temporality. It does not consist of a sequence of ‘nows,’ nor does it have a distinct past, present, and future. Originary temporality is a manifestation of the simultaneous unity of *pastness*, *en-presenting*, and *futurity* that conditions every experience. As a condition of the emergence of any human experience, originary temporality is invisible to conscious reflection, but it allows us to gain a sense *that* we exist, as well as *how* we are oriented to our most fundamental possibilities. From this situation, basic temporal awareness of who we are and what we can be, we experience the kind of time that we can access in reflection as we live through our experiences. This is what Heidegger calls “world time” (425). We rely upon world time as the shared socio-linguistic background to basic utterances such as ‘see you later,’ or ‘It’s about 7pm, I will meet you at 8pm’. But the structure of originary temporality is always there, as a sense of continuing to be, and in continuing to be, being open to possible ways of existing in world time. Knowing that we are here, now, open to possibility, not determined by fate, and counting on continuing to be here, now, we make a promise to meet in the future. Our sense of basic temporal existence also makes memory possible. Because originary temporality is the manifestation of *pastness*, *en-presenting*,

[32] Discussion of ordinary time, which is symbolically represented time, lies beyond the scope of this paper.

and *futurity,* we have an intuitive sense of the unity of time that makes living in the past or bursting into tears over an event that happened seven years ago, possible.

The horizons of our action and our fundamental experience of temporality are coordinated by each other. But they are also governed through conformity to what Heidegger calls the 'they.' We: "take our possibilities... first... in accordance with the way things have been interpreted by the 'they.' This interpretation has already restricted the possible options of choice to what lie within the range of the familiar, the attainable, the respectable" (Heidegger 425).

'They' simplify and focus our actions and help make them meaningful, but 'they' also reduce our understanding of our possibilities. The reduction of how we ought to be and what we ought to do eases the burden of responsibility inherent in responding to our most authentic possibilities. Ideally, our most authentic possibilities emerge within a world of engaged concern with who and what we care for, what ultimately matters to us. In this sense, the present is not a moment in time. It is a way of understanding ourselves as human beings permeated with possibility. This type of understanding is not a self-perception or an appraisal of our talents and abilities. It is simply our awareness that as long as we exist, there are possible ways of living meaningful lives that we can be more or less receptive to. This receptivity can never be made fully present.

But there are some ways to investigate how we become more, or less, receptive to our ownmost possibilities. One thing that all human beings have in common is that our possibilities will end when we die, but our deaths are not possible experiences. Existing from day-to-day often requires hiding our deaths from ourselves, but that is not difficult. We do not need to run away from ourselves into the world of events in world time. We only have to drift in the sea of tranquility where our understanding of death has already been made available to us. Death is lifted out of our basic temporal horizon, where it always is, and plotted in the world of events—that will someday happen to us—or that have already happened to others. In this manner, the anxiety that accompanies our existence is transformed into fear, but we can deal with it: "Death gets passed off as something 'actual': its character as a possibility gets concealed, and so are two other items that belong to it—the fact that it is non-relational and that it is not to be outstripped" (Heidegger 253).

Death becomes relational when it becomes an event that we can expect to happen in world time. We can relate to it by talking about it, choosing our casket and burial plot, and purchasing life insurance, so that our death will not be an economic burden to others. From this perspective, the more we know about it, talk about it, and get ready for it, the more we prevent it from coming toward us as our ownmost possibility: "In this manner, the 'they' provides a constant tranquilization about death" (Heidegger 254). But we cannot completely insure ourselves, or assure ourselves. Overwhelmed by our finitude, we sometimes find ourselves in anxiety. The 'nothing' and the 'nowhere' become manifest. This renders our world insignificant. The world still exists, but it is not our world. We still exist, but only in the terror of isolation from ourselves. Anxiety takes away the possibility of understanding and shatters our ontological security. We are unable to be ourselves because nothing matters to us. We cannot go on this way for long. "Looking away from finitude into the infinity of public time" (Heidegger 425), we find escape hatches into the world of events in world time, ensuring our immortality in a 'they' that "never dies because it cannot die: for death is in each case mine" (Heidegger 425). Falling into idle talk, we never latch on to anything, we just float along, and go along, with what 'they' say. It is all a form of white noise, essentially meaningless.

Our understanding of self and world can also become very curious. Curiosity "seeks novelty only in order to leap from it anew to another novelty... in its possibilities of abandoning itself to the world... [it]seeks restlessness and the excitement of continual novelty and changing encounters. In not tarrying, curiosity is concerned with the possibility of distraction" (Heidegger 172). Curiosity and idle talk reinforce each other. Together, they enable ambiguity. In ambiguity, all possibilities are equally meaningful, and

therefore not meaningful in the structure of our own lives. A meaningful life requires commitment, the ability and willingness to see possibilities in light of a future plan that can be carried forward or realized. In our restless search for meaning, we produce nihilism; all possibilities are equally meaningful.

Commitment requires resolve, events must be seized from the 'they' and assembled in a narrative of self-identity, a moving self-image in which the meaning of the individual parts stand in the light of the whole. We have to keep repeating who we are in order to have any bearing on where we are going, beginning our departures from the known into the possible. This repetition is always reaching beyond itself, undergoing revision. But we can also become stuck in time, lost in an eternal present that prevents us from realizing our possibilities.

In Islamic theology, discussions of Jihad, in its lesser and greater forms, are found in the Koran, and the philosophical positions on time are more prevalent in Sufism. These ideas are synthesized in practical, historical, contexts of interpretation and action. In one of the essential Persian texts, the *Kashf al-Mahjūb of al-Hujwīrī,*[33] time has an exoteric, conventional, finite, mode, and an esoteric, ultimate, eternal, mode. The text makes it clear that these different modes of temporal experience are ways of being in time that depend on how receptive one is to them (Coomaraswamy 97). Specifically, *waqt*, which is an awareness of the ultimate mode of temporality, depends on *hal*, which is the person's receptivity to the illuminating moment, or ecstasy, when Allah illuminates the path into eternal time.[34] When in waqt, one is "independent of past and future," and "happy with God in the present" (Coomaraswamy 98). Again, "the most precious of human things is the state of being occupied between the past and future... the Shaykhs have said that 'Time [i.e. Now] is a cutting sword,' because it is characteristic of a sword to cut, and 'Time' cuts the roots of the future and the past, and obliterates care of yesterday and tomorrow from the heart" (Coomaraswamy 98).

If a person falls away from God, he falls into the state of becoming, a stream of mundane actions and events, a series of 'nows,' whose structure and causality is synonymous with world time. However, a person who is in *waqt,* in the presence of eternity, with God acting through him, is still fully responsible for his actions. It is God alone who acts, but the person has accepted his own life and his own destiny, or has turned away from it. Either way, God creates an 'acceptance' in the mind of the person, which also contains an awareness that he could have done otherwise.[35]Thus, being with God in the presence of eternity allows the martyr to die to the life of becoming, to accept his destiny, to act with God in eternity, and still be personally responsible for his actions on earth. Like Achilles, the *mujahid*, the *Fighter of Jihad* becomes immortal through his deeds, but unlike Achilles, who is aware of his mortality and eventually goes to Hades, the *mujahid* acts in the awareness of immortality and eventually attains permanent, heavenly, immortality.

The failure to understand this temporal and existential dimension of the Islamic Jihad produces a misunderstanding of the motives of the mujahid. This is usually cast in terms of an "atavistic politics of retribalization, balkanization, fanaticism, and tyrannical paternalism—a largely pathological orientation associated with violence, intolerance, and little respect for human life"[36] (Euben 8). The Islamic Jihad then becomes 'the other' of western concerns about time, history, and death, "jihad is thus rendered the repository of contemporary anxieties about death, the irrational, religious, and the bloody-minded in what has been defined as modern political life" (Euben 8).

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[33] Circa 1071-1072 C.E

[34] "waqt has need of hal, for waqt is beautified by hal and subsists thereby"—*al-Hujwīrī, Kashf al-Mahjūb*, (Coomaraswamy 98).

[35] The Christian position is not different. e.g., *John* 8.28; 14.10 or *Galatians* 5.18

[36] This view is also common in progressive thought, e.g., Benjamin Barber's "Jihad Vs. McWorld" *The Atlantic Magazine*, 1992.

One way to view this 'othering' is spatial: there is an in-group/out-group dynamic at work in most social processes that creates a virtuous 'us' and a vicious 'them.' But the temporal aspect, and the effect on motivation must not be overlooked. Seizing upon their finitude while living, the mujahids' 'ownmost possibilities' come toward them and allow them to live authentically, as beings-toward death. In this sense, 'Islam' is a meaningful totality where life's purpose has already been achieved. The martyrs already exist in paradise. They have a narrative about the future and the end of history. Their ontological security does not require sidestepping the problem of death. They are already beyond it.

How does the intensity of being in the presence of eternity compare to the boredom of drifting in an eternal present? On September 11th, 2001, history shattered. It exploded everywhere, on televisions and mobile phones, on screens in every public space. The bubble was replaced by a hole in the ground, signifying a perpetual expectation of risk and danger coming out of nowhere. In *Falling Man,* Keith Neudecker finds himself on the street after escaping from one of the towers before it collapsed: "There was something critically missing from the things around him. They were unfinished, whatever that means. They were unseen, whatever that means, shop windows, loading platforms, paint-sprayed walls. Maybe this is what things look like when there is no one here to see them" (5).

Nina Bartos is a retired Professor of Art History. She is aware of the superficiality of contemporary life, pointing out that her daughter, Lianne, visited the world's ancient sites to study them but took nothing away because she went as a tourist with shallow friends. Nina prefers to remain in a world of nostalgia-tinged images assembled in an aestheticized landscape of dreams: "She didn't know anything about the people in the photographs. She only knew the photographs. This is where she found innocence and vulnerability, in the nature of old passports, in the deep texture of the past itself, people on long journeys, people now dead" (5).

Nina spends time at the museum, looking at the old masters. She is involved in a long-term, long-distance, relationship with a German art dealer. She calls him Martin Ridnour, but Lianne questions his true identity: "Martin Ridnour? Yes. Did you tell me once that's not his real name?... Maybe I don't know his real name... Twenty years. Traveling with him. Sleeping with him. Why do I have to know his name? He's Martin. What will I know about him if I know his name that I don't know now?" (145).

Nina is aware that his real name is Ernst Hechinger. He was an active member of Kommune 1 (146), a radical leftist group influenced by the situationist critique of what Guy Debord called the Society of the Spectacle, wherein capitalism becomes an immense accumulation of reified images, a false totality, and a meaningless way of life. Our possibilities for self-actualization are projected into a world of images that appear to have a life of their own. We then passively consume the images as they absorb our possibilities.[37] Ridnour now deals in images and symbols. In the 1960s, as Hechinger, he was a guerrilla fighter, a real physical presence, throwing eggs at the ruling class and setting off bombs. It is fitting that he made the move from assaulting the spectacle to speculation in the international art market where buzz in the global media about a painter who has been dead for centuries can increase the value of his canvases instantaneously. This market is a barometer, reacting to anachronistic speculations and global gossip, information circulated so rapidly that it becomes true before the facts can be checked. Perhaps Ridnour, whose lifestyle is less than opulent, is selling art to finance the Hechingers of today. Although he subsists in an immaterial world, he offers Nina a solid materialist analysis of the 9/11 attacks:

> One side has the capital, the labor, the technology, the armies, the agencies, the cities, the laws, the police, and the prisons. The other side has a few men willing to die. 'God is great,' she said. Forget God. These are

[37] e.g.: "The images detached from every aspect of life fuse in a common stream in which the unity of this life can no longer be reestablished. Reality considered partially unfolds, in its own general unity, as a pseudo-world apart, an object of mere contemplation" (Debord 4).

> matters of history. This is politics and economics. All the things that shape lives, millions of people, dispossessed, their lives, their consciousness. (47)

Lianne is Nina's daughter. Her response to the trauma is interesting because she was not literally in the explosion and did not experience the danger firsthand. She is an avid reader of Kierkegaard, who "gave her a danger, a sense of spiritual brink. The whole of existence frightens me, he wrote. She saw herself in this sentence" (118). And yet this is just a hipster pose. Lianne "struggles"[38] with religion but does not take a leap of faith. "Lianne struggled with the idea of God. She was taught to believe that religion makes people compliant. This is the purpose of religion, to return people to a childlike state" (62-63). Instead, she returns to a childlike state in two stages.

First, she asks that 'they' help her alleviate her anxiety. She uses the Alzheimer's sufferers she is working with in her writing-therapy group. Perhaps she can get them to construct a narrative that will turn her anxiety and powerlessness into something they can all fear and take revenge upon. She needs them more than they need her. But they cannot deliver any explanations. Nor can 'they' agree that God is Great, so there is no security provided by listening to their religious reflections. Then she tries to get to them to scapegoat the terrorists, but they cannot picture them, or locate them, or understand their motives, so they cannot situate them in a simple narrative of Good and Evil.

When all else fails, she grows increasingly frustrated and confronts her neighbor, Elena, from whose apartment Lianne had frequently heard 'Middle Eastern' music. In the ensuing argument over Elena's 'insensitive' behavior, Lianne struggles with her and punches her in the face, hardly a Kierkegaardian move. Keith is Lianne's estranged husband. For him there is no longer any expected future or recoverable past. He was in one of the towers at impact. He has survived death. His world is shattered, but he needs nothing. He lets go of his identity, except for the official papers that will allow him to exist as a legal subject and his trekking boots that will allow him to keep moving. Nothing else matters:

> He put some things in a suitcase, a few shirts and trousers and his trekking boots from Switzerland and to hell with the rest. This and that and the Swiss boots because the boots mattered and the poker table mattered but he wouldn't need the table, two players dead, one badly injured. A single suitcase, that was all, and passport, checkbooks, birth certificate and a few other documents, the state papers of identity. He stood and looked and felt something so lonely he could touch it with his hand. (27)

It is Keith who takes the real leap of faith. He was working in finance, the system where people trade in the futures markets, borrowing on the future, counting on the future, looking forward to comfortable retirements. After the future closes down, he deliberately plunges into risk and uncertainty, taking up residence in a hotel in Las Vegas, becoming a gambler in the radically contingent world of high-stakes poker. Leaping into a bubble that can burst at any moment, he survives one-day-at-a-time in a system of risk and speculation that mirrors the most volatile aspects of global capitalism, the very system that was targeted by the terrorists. The catastrophe has announced itself and he has survived; anything is possible. He realizes the futility of escaping into the eternal present. He trades longevity, security, and boredom for intensity. He and Lianne are fundamental opposites: "She wanted to be safe in the world and he did not" (216).

Although Keith does not want to be safe, his response to his brush with death can be seen as an escape into his own comfort zone. He had always been an adventurer but had conformed outwardly to The American Dream: a steady job, wife, and child. Taking advantage of the liminal period after the attacks, a

[38] *Struggle* is the typical English translation of the word *Jihad*.

time when drastic changes are possible, he simply embraces his past as his new future, going off to live high and die.

In the meantime, those most deeply committed to the Islamic Jihad already exist in the presence of eternity, united in a community of the world to come. They are in this community because operating underneath the radar of the west gathers them together in physical proximity:

> [T]hey knew that all signals traveling in the air are vulnerable to interception. The state has microwave sites. The state has ground stations and floating satellites, Internet exchange points. There is photo reconnaissance that takes a picture of a dung beetle from one hundred kilometers up. But we encounter face to face. A man turns up from Kandahar, another from Riyadh. We encounter directly, in the flat or the mosque. The state has fiber optics but power is helpless against us. The more power, the more helpless. We encounter through eyes, through word and look. (81)

They are also in a community because their understanding has gone beyond, into what Jean Luc Nancy refers to as the inoperative community:

> The genuine community of mortal beings, or death as a community, establishes their impossible communion... A community is the presentation to its members of their mortal truth... its death, but also its birth, and only the community can present me my birth, and along with it the impossibility of my reliving it, as well as the impossibility of crossing over into my death. (15)

They found a way to channel the panic of temporal existence, the absence of a base, into a community that they can build on earth as they ascend to heaven. Hammad, a character who represents al-qā'ida, which means 'the base,' recalls a conversation with an Iraqi veteran of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988). This man, who prayed in the same mosque with Hammad in Hamburg, recounted his memory of boy soldiers from Iran:

> He was a rifleman in the Shatt al Arab, fifteen years ago, watching them come across the mudflats, thousands of shouting boys. Some carried rifles, many did not, and the weapons nearly overwhelmed the smaller boys, Kalashnikovs, too heavy to be carried very far. He was a soldier in Saddam's army and they were the martyrs of the Ayatollah, here to fall and die. They seemed to come up out of the wet earth, wave on wave, and he aimed and fired and watched them fall. (77)

Already in the presence of eternity, borne out of the wet earth in the middle of the desert, adorned with the garlands of paradise, the keys around their necks defined their possibility. Their ever-present deaths situated them in a historical narrative and illuminated their actions, gathering them in a meaningful totality. They moved into their future rebirth, an event they must have envisioned as they moved forward 'wave on wave.'

Conclusions

Their deaths were also a tactic in a battle strategy, part of the plan to build a community on earth: "ten thousand boys, enacting the glory of self-sacrifice to divert Iraqi troops and equipment from the real army massing behind front lines" (78). It does not matter whether the boys were aware of their specific role as decoys, or that their battle was not the real engagement with the enemy Iraqi soldiers. Their role in the struggle cohered perfectly with the structure of the temporality that they inhabited. They were finding the way already chosen for them, resolutely holding themselves open to their ownmost possibility as their future came toward them. They were already justified in the presence of eternity within the plot

structured for them: “Plot closed the world to the slenderest line of sight, where everything converges to a point” (174).

In these narratives, intensity prevails over duration, producing an automatic disposition to act. Those of us who have been taught to understand life’s possibilities as a collection of experiences to count on and gain from, adding up pleasures and subtracting pains, may only see brainwashing and waste of life. Yet, as Hammad’s interiority reveals in a different part of the novel: “When he saw a storm bearing in from the gulf he wanted to spread his arms and walk right into it. These people, what they hold so precious we see as empty space” (177).

While his counterpart slumbers in the seductive illusions of eternal present, the Jihadist recognizes himself as an eternal being momentarily caught up in the tide of history, which he understands, is ultimately a seductive illusion. Death is stronger than life.

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Book Review: *Modernitatea tendenţială. Reflecţii despre evoluţia modernă a societăţii* by Constantin Schifirneţ

Reviewed Work:
Constantin Schifirneţ, *Modernitatea tendenţială. Reflecţii despre evoluţia modernă a societăţii.*[39] Bucureşti: Tritonic, 2016. [203 pg]. Print.

Based on the author's previously published studies and on the analysis of the Romanian notion of 'building without a foundation,' *Modernitatea tendenţială. Reflecţii despre evoluţia modernă a societăţii* shows how modernity has started in the Occident and then it spread all over the world, trying to impose itself on every country and meeting, more often than not, with forms of resistance.

Modernity has started in the West, Professor Constantin Schifirneţ shows us through a survey of the great theoreticians and the way they defined it, after having presented, in the Introduction, his three directions of research: 1. Modernity as the same process in every industrialized, urbanized and democratic society; 2. The non-Occidental modernity as a late and unavoidable phenomenon resulted from the reproduction of the Occidental type; and 3. The non-Occidental modernity and the independence of the cultural traditions, deeply imprinted in people's collective subconscious, from the economic development.

An important point for any Sociology student but not only, the author starts with the theses previous to the 1960s, namely those of Karl Marx, Émile Durkheim and Max Weber, the latter arguing that modernity has appeared in Europe and that all societies should have followed "the European prototype due to its potential of universal development" (22) (translation mine).[40] Making use of a rich bibliography, Anthony Giddens, Jurgen Habermas, Ulrich Beck or Zigmund Bauman to mention but a few, the author establishes a sum of the features characterizing modernity: industrialization, rationalization, capitalism, urbanization, the scientific and educational revolution, individualism, private versus public, the national state with its due territory and stability, the democratic political organization, citizenship, the civil society, the human rights, equality before law, popular sovereignty, social justice, secularism, technology, bureaucracy, the universalist humanity, paid work, nature versus society, social diversity, social protection, the rule of law, pluralism, representative bodies, management.

The second part of the book focuses on the definition of his most original and significant term, "tendenţialitatea"—"the tendency." Briefly stated, this refers to Romania's attempts, as well as those of the non-Occidental countries to translate the results of modernity rather than the process as such, without possessing the necessary traditions and economy to be able to sustain and complete such a process.

At a closer look, we find out that "the unforeseen consequences of the first occidental modernity have distorted it in its own space—the 'western' and have thus determined only the tendency towards its universality in the non-western space" (60). Therefore, "the principles of modernity are open to anti-imperialist critique, to innovation and redefinition, especially from a non-European perspective" (60).

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[39] *Tendentious Modernity. Thoughts on the Modern Evolution of Society*

[40] All translations are mine

European or not, "tendency" means that transformations do not affect the entire society, but only the political, institutional and juridical levels. Modernity happens only for the elites, it is "inconsistent and slow" (94), the internal resources for the change—deological, political, cultural, economic, administrative and financial resources—are absent. That society is only superficially touched, with huge gaps among social groups and regions, with advantages especially for those in the urban areas.

"Tendency" means "a subsistence economy," the prevalence of agriculture, traditional occupations, the middle class in minority, non-functional bureaucracy, an incipient civil society (cf. Schifirneţ 107), "limited political participation," "the majority of the population dependent on the state's actions and decisions," "collectivism" (107). The natives' resistance, through "premodern political, religious and cultural structures" to "the globalized modernity" (107) perceived as stripping them of their own values, is also called "tendency."

The role of the elites is well highlighted here, completely separated from the rest of the people, one might say, "outside their national frame" (159), as a

> consequence of a downwards change, from a minority educated in the spirit of modernity and oriented towards modern transformations, to an indifferent majority hostile to that change. The modernization process has showed its limits when it counted on socializing the elites for modernity, and the effects have translated into a specific rhetoric unfit to the social and national realities. (159)

The modern man is also absent from this type of modernity, limited to a small part of the urban population, educated, we might say, in the progressivist ideology. His total inefficiency shows when he chooses to simply copy institutions from other societies, institutions these societies have either already given up, or have transformed for better use, and that do not even match the true necessities of the native space. As a general idea for defining "tendency," the developing state has the national construction as top priority, leaving the social and economic development aside.

In the context of the current debates and conflicts inside the European Union, Constantin Schifirneţ sees a "tendentious Europeanization" defined as:

> malfunctions derived from the discrepancy between the European institutions' abstract rationalism and the complex realities from each member country of the European Union. We can notice how this European institutionalism tries to regulate political and juridical reports for national societies and states, but not starting with the experience of a state and of a natural European society, and the consequence would be the distortion of the real meaning of Europeanization. (Schifirneţ, "Europeanizarea" 38, qtd in Schifirneţ, *Modernitatea* 94, footnote)

One project the author sees as just "tendency" is "a liberal society centered on the idea of human autonomy," "universal and without limits as a principle" (98), therefore a total utopia.

Another interesting aspect of this book is the way Constantin Schifirneţ applies his theories on several concrete examples: the Asian modernity (China, Japan, South Korea), the Latin-American modernity, the Indian modernity and, of course the Romanian modernity.

As a general feature of the Asian modernity, we have "a mixture of traditional elements, colonial reminiscences and the natives' effort to adapt to the change" (69). Thus, "the study of the local cultural identities" (70) is of major importance for the Asian intellectuals, as an "alternative way of development" 70). Extremely significant, even their central element, is Confucianism which, unlike the "western individualism based on the standard of the law" (70), has been introduced as:

> a way of spreading the ruling class political ideology among the population and as an ethic norm for the daily life of this population. Thus, the social norms and the political ideology have largely been established by Confucian values, although their civic life has varied from country to country. This cultural community

> based on Confucianism serves to form a common regional identity and common values, as a necessary condition to consolidate the North-Eastern Asian countries into a single economic community. (70)

The Latin-American modernity is defined, instead, by the difference between the center/metropolis (mother country) and the periphery, the latter failing to level with and to repeat the modernizing experience of the center. According to the Chilean sociologist Jorge Larraín,[41] there are six stages in the modernization of Latin-America, starting with the colonial period (1492-1810) and ending with the neo-liberal period (1990-present).[42]

Totally unlike the first two examples, but somehow similar to the Romanian theory of 'building without a foundation,' it is India, which, according to Dipankar Gupta,[43] has started "the revolution from above," "even against the trend of popular demands," mistaking "modernity for the contemporary trends and for fashion, without the adoption of the occidental values of social equality" (Gupta qtd. in Schifirneţ 116) .Thus, the west supporters, the "west intoxicated" as Gupta calls them, do nothing but use their birth privileges, or their access to wealth and power to show off "their social distance from the rest of the population" (Gupta qtd. in Schifirneţ 76).

Finally, Romania is either similar to India, as in the example above, or to South Korea, in the sense of the "comprised modernity," or the "shortcutting of stages in the modern evolution" (74). Romania is a modern country without the modern man (cf. 76), a country that has started from "asserting its national spirit and from its political construction towards the economic development" (14), where the elites consider themselves European, but the population is traditionalist and much more indifferent to their sophisticated speeches "about liberty, democracy, justice" (124). As Constantin Schifirneţ explains, in Romania:

> the tendentious modernity advances hardly and slowly through the complicated red of socio-institutional structures of the Romanian traditional and patriarchal society. It is a mosaic modernity, without any dominant shape. Modernity supports nationalism like a frame, but not economically, the correct way to lay the foundation of any national state, only as a tendency, as an ideal to be reached when asserting the nation. All the aberrations, the contradictions, the discrepancies from the modernization process are, actually, typical phenomena in the new trend of capitalist development, a development that has been only partial and incomplete. That explains, for example, the new serfdom, which is not a new form of serfdom, but tendentious or partial capitalism, without the economic capitalist mechanisms, that is, without its performance and its profitableness, the indicators of this economy. (14).

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[41] Jorge Larraín, *Identity and modernity in Latin America*. Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000. 19. Print.

[42] The colonial period (1492-1810), the oligarchic modernity (1810-1900), the end of the oligarchic modernity (1900-1945), the post-war expansion of modernity (1945-1970), dictatorships (1970-1990), neoliberalism (1990-present) (Larraín qtd. in Schifirneţ 85).

[43] Dipankar Gupta, *Mistaken Modernity: India between Worlds*. New Delhi: HarperCollins, 2002. 2. Print

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